

THE PANDEMIC: A SACRAMENTAL READING

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“It is precisely the experience of the body as the opening of the person to the world that is decisive for understanding why the Christian sacraments cannot be received virtually.”



A slew of people have wondered recently how to live the pandemic from a Christian perspective. What sort of light does Christianity offer us to interpret the weight of this event in our history? And to face its challenges? In what follows, I would like to defend the following thesis: the key to understanding the pandemic is sacramental.

In order to see this, we could take as our starting point the pandemic's epiphanic character, which has been a great sign in the flesh. The pandemic and lockdown have revealed, among other things, the hardship of life when our bodies are isolated from others or when we fear interpersonal relationships, deeply rooted as they are in the body; the need to understand health as a prior gift that is not entirely under our control; the poverty entailed in absolutizing this same health, thus reducing life to mere survival.

All this has been a sign for our generation, for such a way of living the body already prevailed in our society. In

fact, society promotes the isolation of the body, a body that keeps its distance and is reduced by man (at least in thought) to an expression of his true “I.” This body cannot serve as the foundation for any sacrament, that is, for any opening of the body that would move man beyond himself. Is it possible that the pandemic, having thus exposed the poverty of such a way of living the body, could reawaken a nostalgia for the sacramental?

In order to perceive the sacramental significance of the pandemic, a complementary approach is possible, one that is directly linked to the confession of faith in Christ: starting from the preeminence given to the Church’s sacraments.

And yet, is it really the case that the sacraments have been preeminent? Have we not, on the contrary, lived without the sacraments, or at least without the faithful to partake of them? The sacraments, in fact, have been preeminent precisely for this reason: because they have been absent when we hoped they would have been available. They cried out in their silence.

In fact, however, the sacraments have not been altogether absent. Instead, they have acquired a virtual character, for we have grown used to experiencing them by watching a screen and putting on headphones. But precisely this virtual substitute helps us concretize the kind of absence suffered: what has been missing is the sacrament qua corporeal event, that is, as that which takes place through the body in order to vivify all of man, including his body.

Could it be, then, that having experienced the anguish of life when we have no access to the sacrament in its corporeal form, we better understand what the sacrament is, and so discover what we had already forgotten before the pandemic, in our society and in the Church?

1. VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION VERSUS BODILY COMMUNICATION

Let us begin with the difficulties of participating in the sacraments. This has been a result, on the one hand, of a real danger of contagion, which made limiting celebrations a prudent

decision. But it was accentuated by an excessive fear of contagion that revealed the nonsacramental priorities of our society and many of the faithful. A “zero risk” policy has often been required when it comes to the sacraments, while reasonable risks were permitted to obtain food or drink.

This corresponds to a notion of health as the essential or primary good, for which everything else must be sacrificed. To understand health as an absolute is to relinquish a sacramental view of life. For a sacramental view of life reveals precisely its superabundance, that is, that there is more to life than its mere preservation. To live is, actually, to be always outside of oneself so that, in this way, life may be magnified and multiplied. In fact, as the fundamental sacrament of the Eucharist bears witness, life can only be obtained when it is handed over to the Father for our brothers and sisters.

The sacraments are also relativized when they are measured merely according to their function. Then it is taken for granted that the sacraments are useful because they offer resistance to the pandemic, because they help us to live meaningfully in isolation or bear the deaths of our loved ones. Yet, if this were all, the sacraments could be replaced with other activities that would fulfill the same purpose. But this would destroy them, since it is proper to the sacraments to make present what cannot be substituted for anything else, what is not useful for anything in the world, but rather exists beyond the world and gives ultimate meaning to all worldly things.

Be that as it may, this difficulty in celebrating the sacraments during the pandemic recalls something proper to the Christian faith, namely that salvation arrives by way of the body. By way of contrast, let us think of Buddhism, for which the pandemic should not cause any great disturbance, its goal being to eliminate the sensible appearances of the material world. If Christianity suffers from the outbreak of something as material as a virus, this is because the Christian faith is a faith rooted in matter.

On the other hand, the pandemic does not annihilate Christian worship. On this point Christianity differs from ancient Judaism, which was centered on the Jerusalem Temple. The difference lies in that, for Christianity, the material essential for worship is not outside of man (in the sacrificed animal, on the

altar or the stone temple) but in the Christian's own body, incorporated into the eucharistic body of Jesus. For that reason, although it may not be possible to participate in the liturgy, it is always possible to "present your bodies as a living sacrifice" (Rom 12:1–2).¹ In this respect, it is remarkable that the New Testament does not use cultic vocabulary to speak of liturgical celebration, but does use it to describe the life of the faithful, whether in the service of charity (cf. Heb 13:16) or in the preaching and acceptance of the Gospel (cf. Phil 3:17).

Based on this extension of cult to the whole of life, one could downplay the absence of the sacraments: deep down, is a virtual celebration not the same? Indeed, if the goal of Christian worship is to sanctify ordinary life, there does not seem to be much of a problem with worship that is celebrated remotely. We can compare this to telework. It is true that in teleworking something is lost (for example, empathy with coworkers or clients becomes more difficult), yet the work's essence is carried out (continuing with the same example, we can still "seal the deal"). Could not the essence of the sacraments also be fulfilled virtually, so that "the deal" (that is, the covenant) with God is sealed, even if some emotion or sentiment is lost?

The question of the possibility of celebrating a sacrament virtually pinpoints the essence of the sacraments, inasmuch as they require matter and the body. The present age does not understand that matter can have a language or mediate a personal presence, grace. According to this view, the divine does not seem to be accessible to the body, but rather to the intimate experience and genuine expression of personal authenticity. In this light, as Joseph Ratzinger says, the following questions arise: "Why, really, do I have to go to church in order to encounter God? Is God then bound to a rite and to a place? Can what is spiritual be mediated or even bound by ritual and material means?"² The German theologian Karl-Heinz Menke expressed the same question thus: "There has been up until now no Protestant theologian

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Scripture are from the Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (RSVCE).

2. Joseph Ratzinger, "The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence," in *Collected Works*, vol. 11: *Theology of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 153–68, at 155.

who has been able to give me a more or less satisfactory answer to the question about what is, properly speaking, the *plus* of sacramental communication with Christ compared to nonsacramental communication with him.”³

This same difficulty arises with regard to virtual celebration. What is gained from bodily participation in the sacrament, as opposed to online attendance? What is at stake here is the question of how God makes himself present and acts. More concretely, what is at stake is the extent to which God uses the body and matter, whether in creation or in Christ’s redemptive work, to communicate his salvation to us.

2. THE BODY: FOUNDATIONAL SPACE FOR PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

To answer the question, let us begin with an obvious difference between virtual and in-person communication. In a virtual relationship only two senses are available: sight and hearing. The other senses—touch, taste, and smell—are lacking. We could reject the latter two senses as the lowest and most animalistic, but this response reveals that they are, in fact, the most bodily senses.

Indeed, hearing and sight are exercised in principle from a distance, without the need to share the same space. But touch, smell, and taste require sharing a place with the perceived reality, that is, they require a shared environment.⁴ In this way, these senses remind us that man is inseparable from the world that surrounds him and in which he finds other people, that is, they remind us that man is an incarnate being, since what is proper to flesh (which is at once intimate and exterior, united to the personal “I” and to the material cosmos) is to place the person in his environment or world.

That these senses are “environment-senses” [*sentidos-ambiente*] is clear from touch, since touch is extended throughout the body, which is man’s first environment. This is why the ancients

3. Karl-Heinz Menke, *Sacramentalidad. Esencia y llaga del catolicismo* (Madrid: BAC, 2014), 115. Originally published as *Sakramentalität: Wesen und Wunde des Katholizismus* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2013).

4. Regarding this question, cf. Hans Jonas, “The Nobility of Sight,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 14 (1954): 507–19.

considered touch the most bodily sense, most closely bound to the element earth, while sight was considered the most spiritual, united to fire.⁵ Taste, in turn, is also an “environment-sense,” for it is based on the ability to assimilate food, that is, to receive our surroundings and make them our own. For this reason, it is impossible to eat “at a distance,” or to share food with someone who does not share our place. Finally, smell, which stems from breathing within a certain atmosphere, is likewise linked to an environment shared with others.

In short, these senses are crucial in the sense that they place man in an environment or world and propose that we define man in constant relation with that environment or world. In other words, someone who breathes, eats, and has a sense of touch cannot simply present himself as an isolated individual “in front of” the world, since he is someone who belongs to the world and whose identity is forged in his interaction with the world. Consequently, taking the senses into account eliminates a Cartesian perception of the subject as an individual standing at a distance from the objective world, separated from it. More than “*cogito ergo sum*,” the senses invite us to say, “I touch, taste, smell, *ergo*: I am in relation.” The senses, therefore, allow us to discover the body as the opening of the person to his environment, so that the person can only be defined as rooted in this environment and not outside of it.

The environment’s importance corresponds to a radical experience of the person: the need to have a home. By home we understand here not the building or house of brick or wood but that space linked to one’s own identity where the person finds himself. This is why losing one’s home affects the core of the person’s very being, as if one were losing oneself. The home is so important for man precisely because he has his own body as his “first home,” a fragile house of clay, according to the book of Job (4:19). Or, more precisely, he has the body as his “first home” inasmuch as he is in harmony with the world and especially with other persons he recognizes as familiar. In other words, the body is a home in that it reveals to us that we are sons and brothers, that our identity is constituted as filial and fraternal.

5. Cf. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 3.4 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 28/1, 66, line 24).

The body's capacity to be an environment becomes even clearer if we consider the conjugal union between man and woman. Here the body appears as a common environment that makes their union possible. More precisely, the union is brought about in a specific aspect of the body: sexuality. And this is decisive, because sexuality denotes the body as the original place where the spouses themselves were engendered, and where they remember that they remain sons and daughters. This is why the conjugal union is sealed in the flesh as the environment that precedes us and conveys our origin in others.

This means that man and woman are united in an environment (the environment of their sexed bodies) that allows them to share the roots of their being, the foundations of each of their homes. For this reason, when they unite, their worlds change radically and a new "we" appears, which Genesis refers to as "one flesh" (Gn 2:24). This explains that in matrimony the spouse is no longer someone outside of myself, with whom I establish relationships and interrupt them whenever I want, but someone who now belongs to my own identity. This is expressed in many cultures with the change of last name that takes place after the wedding.

Certainly, all of this would be unthinkable in a virtual or computerized mode. Matrimony can be celebrated remotely (by proxy), but it is only consummated in the carnal union, which requires presence. Moreover, the carnal union is where life is transmitted, which cannot take place at a distance either.

We see, therefore, that it is thanks to the common environment shared through their bodies that two persons are not only two individuals standing face to face, united merely by external ties. On the contrary, a common environment unites persons within their very own being, which is why their mutual communication can be much more profound, touching what they are at their roots and making them capable not only of communicating things but of communicating themselves.

Let us add that the body's environment-quality also distinguishes corporeal from virtual communication by virtue of the way in which both open toward transcendence beyond the persons communicating. In virtual communication, it is man who has designed and created the communicative environment. If there is any opening to transcendence in this communication,

then it will not arise from within the common environment but from the individuals themselves, from their will or knowledge. On the other hand, in face-to-face communication there is the common environment of the body, which neither person has created but rather originally received. Thus, for instance, the spouses created neither their sexual difference nor their capacity to communicate life, which allows their union to take place. The opening to the Creator, then, appears from within the relation itself that unites the persons to one another. That is, those who communicate give thanks to the Creator, not only for the gift he has given to each, but for the gift of love that unites them, which comes from him and tends toward him. God himself can appear in this light as the God who, as the foundation of love, is Love himself.

From this we can conclude that virtual relations make sense only as a subsidiary of real, bodily presence. If a virtual logic is absolutized, however, the body as the constitutive environment of the person is renounced, and the person is conceived as an isolated individual, separated from the world and from others. It is precisely the experience of the body as the opening of the person to the world that is decisive for understanding why the Christian sacraments cannot be received virtually.

3. VIRTUAL LOGIC AND CHRISTIAN SACRAMENTS

What we have discussed thus far regarding the body as a relational environment is crucial for understanding the redemption brought about by Christ. And this is because Christ assumed the logic of the bodily communication we described. His body was a relational body, which made him one of us, entering the line of generations that, through Mary, went back to Adam and Eve. Hence, the Son of God not only lived a history like ours but our very same history, the common history of men.

In other words, in taking flesh, the Son of God received our same human environment, which is why it can be said that he “lived among us” (Jn 1:14). Therefore, the “environment-senses” are essential to the Incarnation: that he had the ability to touch, shared our food, and inhaled and exhaled our air. If the history of men is united from flesh to flesh, Christ, by

transforming the flesh he assumed from Mary, has transformed at its core the environment in which man lives.

In this way, what he has accomplished in his flesh does not remain in him but affects all men. More concretely, Christ's way of life is made accessible to all who enter in the new environment inaugurated by him. By entering in the environment of his body, we can receive the Spirit that descended upon him and worked in him. This is where the sacraments come in.

Indeed, the sacraments prolong the corporeal environment of Christ so that we may be incorporated in him. Participating in the sacraments, we partake of that environment that Jesus inaugurated in his body, where it is possible to live as he lived. The center of this environment is the Eucharist, "sacrament of sacraments,"⁶ around which the rest revolve and in which the matter of bread and wine becomes the body and blood of Christ, which we eat and drink. For this reason, the "environment-senses" are essential also for the sacraments. Let us ponder Jesus' encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24): the key to recognizing him was not their sight or hearing, but the breaking of the bread (taste) and the fire in the heart (touch), which granted a new sight and a new hearing.

It is from the point of view of the Eucharist, where Christ's body is made present, that we can understand the necessity of the other sacraments' material contact (the water, the oil, the bodies that unite, or the imposition of the hands). It is the task of each sacrament's matter to mediate our contact with Jesus' flesh. In this way, in the sacrament Christ touches our body, which is our first environment and dwelling, and transforms it into a new relational environment. Thanks to the sacrament's matter, Christ's action does not remain outside of us as a mere example for us to imitate, but rather transforms our identity and enables new kinds of actions stemming from our unity with him.

In each sacrament, the matter effects different ways of incorporation into Christ's body, according to the differing meanings of his body. Thus, for instance, baptism consists of being born into the body of Christ; confirmation consists of

6. Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sententiarum* d. 25, q. 3, a. 2, qncula. 1 arg 4.

participating in building up his body; matrimony consists of associating the original language of the body contained in the conjugal unity of man and woman to Christ's body, and so on.

It is true that grace can be received even when the sacrament is not celebrated, as the medieval axiom has it: "God did not bind his power to the sacraments."⁷ But this is only applicable when there is an impediment that prevents our drawing near the sacrament. Moreover, even in this case, the conferral of grace is imparted only if the intention to participate in the sacrament whenever it is possible to do so is included. For this reason, the reference to sacramental matter is still necessary. According to classical theology, the sacraments are necessary as means and not only as precepts. That is, sacraments are necessary not only because God commanded so, but because they themselves put us in contact with God and transform us to a full communion with him. Only from this direct contact with Christ in the sacraments can the Christian's whole life become worship of God. God, we could say, has not tied his grace to the celebration of the sacraments, but he has tied his grace to a sacramental logic inasmuch as he has tied it to Christ's flesh.

All of this allows us to make a judgment regarding the celebration of the sacraments during the pandemic. We must affirm, on the one hand, that there may be prudential reasons for discouraging participation in the sacraments. If someone did not take proper measures to reduce the risk of a deadly infection, he could not justify this stance from the point of view of his faith in the divine power of the sacrament, which would supposedly protect him from all danger. On the contrary, this attitude would not take into account the dignity of the sacrament, inasmuch as it contains within itself the corporeal language of creation and must preserve the significance of this language. For this reason, the use of contaminated bread or contagious water must be avoided as much as possible, precisely because they do not symbolize well the salvation brought about by God in the sacrament, which is also the salvation of the flesh.

If it is not possible to participate in the celebration, it is possible in some way to join oneself to the sacrament and receive its grace. Here is where virtual communication takes

7. Cf. Peter Lombard, *Sentences* IV, dist. 1, chap. 5, par. 1.

on meaning: in view of the fact that it allows us to approach the sacrament. However, in this case it must be kept in mind that grace is received only if the person tends toward the real sacrament and is disposed to receive it to the greatest extent possible. For it is in the sacrament that we come in contact with the body of Christ, from where grace reaches us. Let us recall, moreover, that all sacramental grace reaches the faithful through the indelible character received in baptism, which make them members of Christ's body. It is not the online channel that mediates grace, allowing it to reach the faithful who are "attending" via livestream, but rather the baptismal incorporation into the Eucharist, incorporation through which eucharistic grace is extended to the whole of our lives.

All this means that, in addition to avoiding the risk of contagion in the celebration, a different risk must be avoided: the devaluation of the sacraments' centrality in the lives of the faithful. For, if this were to happen (if we were to think that it is no longer necessary to live the sacrament in person), the sense of Christian salvation, which is also the salvation of the body, would become diluted. Ultimately, it is always decisive to remember that the sacrament is not celebrated in order to live, but that we live in order to celebrate the sacrament. It is indispensable that nothing take precedence over divine service: "*nihil operi Dei praeponatur.*"⁸

From this point of view, the sacramental crisis during the pandemic is related to the sacramental debate the Church has experienced within the past few years. This debate is exemplified in various interpretations of the apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, according to which sacramental access no longer depends on the bodily situation of the person, that is, on the way in which he lives out his fundamental bodily relationships, such as matrimony ("one flesh"). A separation is effected, therefore, between the sacrament and the living body of the believer, which parallels the separation that occurs in the virtual "sacrament."

For this reason, whoever maintains the separation between married life and eucharistic life, which is common in these interpretations of *Amoris laetitia*, will not be able to account

8. Benedict of Nursia, *Rule* 43.3 (Sources Chrétiennes 182, line 1).

for the necessity of the sacrament's corporeal celebration, and thus why a virtual celebration is inadequate. These interpretations have already defined the sacrament virtually by isolating it from the faithful's concrete way of life in the body, making their reception of the sacrament depend merely upon their subjective consciences. The distinction between in-person and virtual celebration is only possible if the sacrament's connection to the body is accepted, making the reception of the sacrament cohere with the way to live the meanings of the body. The pandemic and lockdown reveal, albeit indirectly, the empty concept of the sacrament that many have assumed, a sacrament that does not reach or transform the faithful's life in the flesh, thus losing its link with the Incarnation.

4. AFTER THE PANDEMIC: TOWARD A RECOVERY OF THE SACRAMENT?

From what we have said thus far we can conclude that the time of pandemic has made us experience the absence of the sacramental. It is an absence we were already unknowingly living, which is why it requires so much effort for us to perceive the difference between virtual and in-person reality. If we were to accept the virtual logic proper to lockdown, the pandemic would accelerate the antisacramental movement of modernity, which, following Bernanos, could be described as an era of progressive disincarnation.⁹ Nonetheless, this same pandemic can also be an opportunity for man to realize that a confined (and virtual) life is not a true life, and thus yearn once again for a sacramental being-in-the world. In lockdown, what it means to reject one's body as a relational environment is revealed in a painful way. Lockdown, therefore, serves as a call to our freedom so that we may recover the primordial language of the body and, with it, a sacramental language.

Furthermore, during the pandemic we perceived the absence of the sacramental, not theoretically but through the

9. Cf. Georges Bernanos, *Essais et écrits de combat* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 673: "Le malheur et l'opprobre du monde moderne, qui s'affirme si drôlement matérialiste, c'est qu'il désincarne tout, qu'il recommence à rebours le mystère de l'Incarnation."

concrete suffering of illness and separation. Here lies a reason to hope. For the suffering of the pandemic is not a virtual suffering, and for this reason it can compel us to escape the trap of virtual reality, making us yearn for the sacrament once more. During the pandemic we have felt the absence of the sacramental, indeed, but we have felt it *sacramentally*.

In order to see that the pain of the pandemic is sacramental, we need to add a point to what we have already mentioned regarding the sacraments. For the sacraments are not only the expression of the plenitude God gives to man, but also creation's road back, wounded as it is by sin, toward its fullness. St. Bonaventure already recognized that penance was, among the sacraments instituted in man's own nature, understood as the ability to repent for sin.¹⁰ And, indeed, that same path is trod through suffering. Only suffering allows us to recover the sacramental meaning of life once that meaning has been lost.

Undoubtedly, suffering clears a sacramental path insofar as it enables us to break free from the illusion of an antisacramental, disincarnate world. For suffering makes us conscious once again of our relation to the body, of the body's opening to the world and to others. In this way, suffering reminds us that our bodies are not mere instruments of self-expression and dominion over the world, but above all the place of original dependence, which opens us to relation with the world, with others, with God. In the suffering body, therefore, a revealing encounter can take place, as well as a relationship that frees us from seclusion within ourselves and that allows us to recover our incarnate place in the world.

For this reason Christ entered the world of suffering: to recover the body as the locus of relation with the Father and other human beings, thus restoring to the body its creaturely significance. If the sacraments instituted by Christ carry the fullness of the body's significance, they do so precisely through suffering. By containing within themselves a passion and death, the sacraments manage to shatter our isolation and open us to the grace of relationship with God and others.

10. Cf. Bonaventure, *In IV Sententiae* d. 23, a. 1, q. 2, co.; d. 22, a. 2, q. 1, conc., in *S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia*, vol. 4 (Quaracchi: Typographia Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1889), 579.

Similar to other kinds of sufferings, the pandemic can be seen as the disintegration of the illusion inhabited by a disincarnate man. This fragmentation can help him remember his flesh, a flesh he was given to open him to the world and to relationships with others, in which the ultimate mystery of life, that is, the Creator-Father, is made manifest. From the point of view of this vision of suffering, we can answer those who complain during hard times by saying: "How much more hardened you are, who do not let these hard times change you!"¹¹

For example, this time of pandemic teaches us that health is not something that is preserved or recovered through technical means alone, as a machine is maintained or fixed. In fact, the lockdown associated with the pandemic can demonstrate that preserving our health at the expense of the relationships to which the body opens us turns out to be harmful for our health. The pandemic can, in this way, be an invitation to recover a vision of health as man's original harmony with his world and with others, a harmony that man first receives, a harmony that he can foster only by receiving it. Let us consider, in this vein, the search for vaccines, whose efficacy depends on the immune system. Here the meaning of medicine is revealed: its task is supplementary to the only healing agent, the organism itself. This vision of health is a sacramental one because it is grounded in the body as the original locus of life, in harmony with the environment and with other human beings.

The fact that the pandemic has been a global event also means that this suffering, which opens man's eyes to his real condition, does not only affect each person but society as a whole. It is all of society that is afflicted during a pandemic, in its relationships and in its ways of living out the common good. For this reason, the suffering caused by a pandemic is not a call for the individual alone but demands a social change that leaves behind the nonsacramental vision that characterizes modernity. Will society be able to relearn that our unity springs from a previous gift we have all received in common? And, therefore, that the good of society does not lie in the realization of each person's autonomous preferences, but rather in the invigoration of our given common life? If this were the case, perhaps we would understand

11. Augustine, *Sermon* 114B, 14.

that society only subsists if it is open to a mystery: the mystery of the Creator.

In light of our discussion, we need to raise one final question: will the pandemic crisis help us surrender and so recover a sacramental logic in society and in the Church?

The Christian doctrine of providence tells us that there are events whose causes elude us. Indeed, whatever takes place in the world is not explained only by secondary causes, for there are contingent occurrences whose cause lies in God alone, so that the cause is not accessible to angels or men.¹² This is why, from the world's point of view, it is difficult to discern the "why" of the pandemic and what end God pursues with it. To fathom this "why" we would need the gift of prophecy.

Now, for Christians, as Revelation says, "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (19:10), since our entire future is already contained in his Resurrection from the dead. This means that faith in Christ allows us to know where providence directs all things: to conformity with the Cross and Resurrection of the Lord. Having said that, Christ's offering on the Cross was the offering of a human freedom that gave itself to the Father for our sake. This means that the providential plan includes within itself the response of our freedom.

It is precisely the sacraments that, insofar as they open up the space of Christ's death and Resurrection, constitute the place where we can be free. Faced with the pandemic, we are called to situate ourselves within the space Christ has opened for us, that is, his own body, a body that reclaims the meaning corresponding to the Creator's plan. To eliminate or postpone the sacraments would not save our lives, for it would eliminate or postpone human action's proper place, the place where we can be free and build a grand, beautiful life.

In a famous homily, St. Augustine gathers the complaints of those who repeat "bad times, hard times." The saint answers them: "Let us live well, and times shall be good. We are the times; such as we are, such are the times."¹³ "Let us live well": for times to be good it is not enough to "survive." Rather, it is imperative to "live well." And such a good life, such a thoroughly human life,

12. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* III, q. 94.

13. Cf. Augustine, *Sermon* 80 (PL 38, col. 498).

is possible only in the space opened up by the sacraments. To live well is, in short, to live on the sacraments, as one lives on bread, so that time becomes eucharistic time, that is, time that grows, through the pandemic, to its fullness.—*Translated by Carmen Ferre Martí.* □

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