

It would appear that we have emerged from our long pandemic isolation and, at least in this part of the country, are doing well and readjusting to our regular patterns of living. The question that hovers over us in the monastery but also throughout the Catholic media is whether people are going to return to church again on a regular basis.

Reports are uneven in different places. Some people have gotten used to watching Mass on their computer and we hear from some people how important and real it has been. Some people are still wary of being in crowds. And some people have shed the need of the church and are no longer interested in taking part in a Sunday worship service.

About a month ago our local Bishops ended the dispensation from attending Sunday Mass and declared the obligation to go to Mass on Sunday was again to be the rule. I wonder how many of you are here because it is an obligation? I would suspect that this is not the general norm anymore.

There are many questions and uncertainties that face us as the church resumes its regular practices. Do your children and grandchildren go to church? Do you think they ever will? Will more churches close as the scarcity of priests becomes more dire? Will the Catholic Church ever ordain married men and women to be presbyters?

The questions don't end with these queries. The prophet Jeremiah talks about the shepherds who failed the people. And Jesus looks at the people of God and sees them as sheep without a shepherd. Many of our Bishops, who are the official shepherds in the church, who should inspire and encourage us, have lost all credibility because of the sexual abuse crisis. Many of them have lost real authority because of their getting lost in the culture wars of our country, of hammering down on sexual issues that seem out of touch with many people, and with their association with particular political movements.

The church, much like our country, is sharply divided. One theologian says we already have a soft schism in the American Church. One of the two sides joins some Cardinals and Bishops in the severe criticism of the Pope.

And Pope Francis has refused to play the conservative – liberal game. He refuses to use a monarchical or imperial way of being Pope.

His vision is for people to take more responsibility, dialogue with each other and with bishops in what he calls synodality, discern together what is best, not by a democratic vote, but by seeking the way of Jesus.

The Church is in a mess. Will it die and disappear after 2000 years?

Or is the crisis a call to a new life? I don't have the answers or know the future.

But I am reminded of the Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, at the time of the Second Vatican Council. He had the wisdom to see what was coming. His prediction was that, in about fifty years, Christians would have to become mystics or they would not be Christians at all. I think this is happening. Obligation, intellectual adherence, ethnic or family traditions, will not keep the faith alive. To be a mystic is not to have visions or extraordinary practices but rather to experience the love of God in one's life. It is to know God in one's daily life, in one's family and friends as well as in all people. The mystic can recognize God in the scriptures, in one's community, in the church that is bigger than one's local group. The mystic sees the good and the holy in the midst of chaos.

The way to being a mystic Christian is to wake up. It means becoming more conscious of life, of nature, of the needs of all people. This waking up requires interiority and centeredness. It means avoiding distraction, centering oneself in prayer and one's awareness of our oneness with all people, with the created world as it in itself evolves into a higher consciousness. It means a love-energy that we recognize in ourselves and extend it, in an unconditional way, to all people and all creation. Evolving with the universe means living inward and moving outward. That is living from an inner unified space of conscious awareness whereby we see the divine light shining through every aspect of this world, even the ugly parts, for nothing is outside the embrace of God's love.

Will the church as it is now continue to exist? We don't know. And it won't matter. God calls us into the future as we evolve with God in our consciousness of new life. Saint John of the Cross is to have declared that at the end of our life we will be judged by only one thing – have we learned to love? Do we care what is

happening to immigrants, to gays, to children, to peoples of color? Do we love them? Can we stand up for justice and the rights of all, including those in the church?

Come, aside and rest a while, Jesus advises. Take time to pray, to be silent, to touch your own spirit where the Spirit of God moves within you. Then let us trust God to bring new life out of dying.

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