

Domestic Liturgies in Time of Lockdown: A Survey to Orientate Post-Covid-19 Liturgical Ministry

Studia Liturgica
2022, Vol. 52(2) 246–262

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DOI: 10.1177/00393207221112183
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Abstract

Based on a survey of 1,200 people in France and Belgium on their ritual practice during the period of lockdown due to COVID-19 (Spring 2020), the author highlights the major importance of eucharistic liturgies broadcast by the various media and followed by many of the faithful, with the theological and pastoral questions that this raises. He notes above all the small but nevertheless significant proportion of domestic liturgies in small locked down groups, whether encouraged or not by their pastors, which give space to certain creativity at the same time as to the Church's liturgical tradition. This observation leads him to question the major challenges of a liturgical and sacramental pastoral ministry geared towards developing and encouraging the assumption of responsibility by the laity for their prayer and liturgical life, beyond and complementary to the Sunday Eucharist, within their communities and more particularly in their family context.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, domestic liturgies, online liturgies, laity, virtual mass, empirical research

From March to May 2020, all public liturgies were shut down by order of the civil authorities in many countries, including French-speaking Western countries. The unprecedented nature of this situation has been widely emphasized.¹ Almost the entire

1. "Liturgies en temps de crise. Liturgie domestiquée et liturgies domestiques," *La Maison-Dieu* 301 (2020), 179–191. See my text "Les liturgies sont, elles aussi, confinées," *La Documentation catholique* 2539 (2020) 32–33 (thematic issue on the Covid-19 pandemic). See also *Sacramental Worship in the COVID-19 Crisis, Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 36 (2020); Hans-Jürgen Feulner, Elias Haslwanter (eds.), *Gottesdienst auf eigene Gefahr? Die Feier der Liturgie in der Zeit von Covid-19*, Münster, Aschendorff, 2020; *La crise de la Covid et ses impacts en pastorale*, *Revue Lumen Vitae* 76 (2021).

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population was locked down in their homes, each person having no choice but to live the liturgical dimension of their faith in a “private” way, with (or without) the other people with whom they lived. The time of lockdown was, thus, an opportunity for Christians to discover or rediscover “domestic liturgies”. We speak of the family as the “church in miniature” (*ecclesiola*) or the “domestic church,” an expression and spirituality rediscovered in the second half of the twentieth century (though already present in the writings of the fourth-century Greek Fathers).² What happened during those three months? How did Catholics who usually attend Sunday Mass feel about this situation? What lessons can we draw from this for the future?

To avoid anecdote, caricature, or echoes gleaned at random, I want to render as objective as possible an analysis of these practices through a survey conducted from June 15 to July 15, 2020, among 1,200 people in Belgium and France.³ The very extensive and rich data that this collected provided solid support for analyzing this temporal shift in Catholic ritual, which, on the one hand, gives an important place to the digital while also empowering the lay faithful to take charge of their own liturgies. Whatever the durability of the practices observed, the experience of those three months should prevent us from returning entirely unchanged to the ritual practice of the time prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains to be seen whether the second lockdown of November, at the current time of writing, will have been experienced differently.

Practices during lockdown showed two main types of lockdown domestic liturgies. Remote eucharistic liturgies were the subject of a detailed publication in a collective volume focusing on liturgical changes caused by the pandemic.⁴ I shall summarize the most convincing elements of that study here in my first point. This will be followed by other domestic liturgies, characterized by a preponderance of biblical texts and considerable creativity within the symbolic register. A third point will be devoted more specifically to Easter liturgies. In my opinion, all of these non-eucharistic lockdown liturgies are the most interesting ones for drawing lessons for a renewed liturgical pastoral ministry (once we have emerged from these uncertain months of renewed lockdown and post-lockdown).

2. Thomas Knieps-Port Le Roi, Gerard Mannion, Peter De Mey (eds.), *The Household of God and Local Households*, Leuven, Peeters, “Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium” 254, 2013.
3. These people were first contacted via three target groups, previously determined to be representative of a variety of Catholics, linked to priests with overall responsibility who had made different pastoral choices during the lockdown: the choice by the parish to go completely digital, without other alternatives; other alternatives without the offer of digital services. The third group was a movement which had a regular practice of family liturgies. The survey was then relayed to various Catholic groups or networks of widely differing “tendencies.”
4. Arnaud Join-Lambert, “Les eucharisties catholiques domestiques confinées. Une mutation rituelle marquée par le numérique,” in Pascal Lardellier (ed.), *Rites et civilités à l'épreuve du Covid: Déritualiser et reritualiser en sociétés (post-)confinées*, Rome, Aracne, 2021, 57–76.

I. Virtual Masses: Lessons and Questions⁵

I.1. A General Overview of the Situation of Those Interviewed

First, here are some general facts about the respondents interviewed in our survey at the beginning of the summer. These people identified themselves as regular attenders of Sunday Mass before the lockdown. This is, therefore, a specific sector representing a definite minority among Catholics. As a reminder, in 2018, this sector of Catholics is estimated at about 5% in France and 9.42% in Belgium, with considerable disparities according to region.⁶ To reach the total number of Catholics in both countries, we need to add about 48% in France and 43% in Belgium, commonly referred to as “non-practicing.” Notably, the proportion of women among the respondents represents the current reality of 67.1%. On the other hand, one general fact that differs from the usual surveys of regular Sunday-churchgoers, namely age distribution, can be explained by the online format of the survey (using a Google platform).⁷ 20–40-year-olds are more widely represented here than in Sunday assemblies.

Finally, the concluding general evidence can be found within the composition of the groups of locked down people surveyed: 25.2% were single people,⁸ 29.9% were couples of two adults, 11.3% were families containing young adults and/or adolescents, 7.8% were families containing teenagers and children, 10.8% were families containing only children and/or small children.⁹ We shall see that this figure is particularly significant where non-eucharistic liturgies are concerned.

The first question concerned Sunday practice as such. “On Sundays during lockdown, did you celebrate the Sunday liturgy? 74.4% continued to celebrate every Sunday liturgically while only 16.6% did so irregularly,¹⁰ and 9% not at all.¹¹ How should this 9% be understood? Is it enough that the collective framework of the liturgy should disappear for all liturgical practices of their faith to cease among these people?

This phenomenon could more plausibly be understood as unpreparedness for this type of situation and the experience of feeling helpless. In the absence of any clear interpretation, we might specify one more point in the evidence that is difficult to interpret: among these 9%, the proportion of respondents living through lockdown without children in

5. Most of what is said in this section is taken from the article mentioned above.

6. *Annual Report: The Catholic Church in Belgium*, Brussels, Licap, 2018, p. 10.

7. 10–20 years (0.8%); 20–30 years (9.3%); 30–40 years (11%); 40–50 years (14.3%); 50–60 years (19.7%); 60–70 years (23%); 70–80 years (16.2%); and over 80 years (5.6%).

8. This situation naturally has a bearing on liturgies, as this testimony shows: “Holy Week as a whole is very important for me and, even if it was a virtual celebration, it was very beautiful. My involvement in my faith lessened a bit after Easter because I found it difficult to stay motivated on my own over that length of time” (woman, 20–30 years old, Brussels).

9. For the remaining 15%, there were also groups of adults such as students or consecrated persons, and there was certainly some incorrect coding.

10. Over the three-month period, several respondents highlight variations in their domestic religious practice, with one woman (aged 20–30) referring to a “rollercoaster.”

11. “I have the impression that I have completely fallen out of practice,” (woman, 40–50 years old, Brussels).

their household is higher (87.5%) than the overall proportion (67.8%). Does this mean that the presence of children encouraged liturgical celebration on Sundays?

1.2. The Practice of Virtual Mass

How did these people celebrate the liturgy? Clearly, it was first of all through the Mass. Three massive facts stand out within our survey: televised Mass has remained a very popular form;¹² many people alternated among media (TV, parish Internet, other Internet sites, the papal Mass, and so forth); Masses on the Internet increased extensively. I limit myself here to providing an outline of the simple figures.¹³ I wish to stress only the great and unquestionable novelty, consisting of the explosion (in number and diversity) of Masses over the Internet.

The study of liturgies and the Internet is a recent development in liturgical research.¹⁴ The radical nature of the situation makes it necessary to proceed cautiously. In the survey, we find a distinction between Masses that are only or partly broadcast from the home parish (24.9%)¹⁵ and those only or partly from another parochial or religious location (26.2%). The availability of multiple answers within the questionnaire enabled the emergence of all possible combinations of practice within the various

12. In principle, this was not a complete novelty, since televised Masses have been around for 71 years. The pandemic situation, however, has brought about differences to this practice, which has already been well documented and analyzed by liturgical research. See Panayotis Ghekas, "Messa e televisione. Tra problematiche teologiche e attese pastorali," *Rivista liturgica* 96 (2009) 97–117; Beate Gilles, *Durch das Auge der Kamera: Eine liturgie-theologische Untersuchung zur Übertragung von Gottesdiensten im Fernsehen*, Münster, Lit Verlag, "Ästhetik—Theologie—Liturgik" 16, 2000; Guy Lapointe, "L'espace liturgique éclaté. Questions autour de la messe dominicale télévisée au Canada francophone," *LMD* 197 (1994) 81–97.
13. 25.5% of people chose the Mass on television as their exclusive Eucharistic practice (half of them with other forms of non-Eucharistic prayer in addition). The Mass on television was chosen alternately with a Mass on one or more websites (25.5%), making a total of 51%. These Masses were broadcast on the France 2, RTBF Première, or KTO channels. Masses only on the Internet were chosen by 34.9%, exclusively on one site or alternatively on several sites. If we add up those with those who alternated with the Mass on television, we see that 59.4% of the respondents participated at least once in a Mass broadcast on the Internet.
14. Teresa Berger, *@ Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*, New York, Routledge, 2017; *Liturgie@internet* (thematic issue), *Heiliger Dienst* 69/2, 2015; *Liturgy in the Digital Age* [thematic issue], *Liturgy* 30, 2015; Marcel Barnard, Johan Cilliers, Cas Wepener, *Worship in the Network Culture. Liturgical Ritual Studies. Fields and Methods, Concept and Metaphors*, Leuven, Peeters, "Liturgia condenda" 28, 2014; In French, we should point out some pages devoted to this subject in Jean-Claude Boilliat, François-Xavier Amherdt, *Les NTIC et la transmission de la foi*, Saint-Maurice, Éd. Saint-Augustin, "Perspectives pastorales" 6, 2013, 171–176 and 237–239.
15. It should be remembered that a very large number of parishes did not broadcast on the Internet. The high percentage seen here is probably not representative of the general situation, due to the self-selection of the first three cohorts seen in note 3.

options available. This is something completely new, well in line with the fluid modernity characterized, among other things, by the instability of affiliations and a rationale of networks, including within the Church.¹⁶ Not only did some of our respondents attend an Internet Mass from elsewhere than their own parish but they sometimes changed from one Sunday to the next. The Internet made possible mobility which is impossible in person for most of the faithful. Some of those surveyed testified to the wonderful “discoveries” they had made.

Two dimensions specific to the digital medium deserve attention. The choice of “app” is an option for interactivity or not. Put simply, we might think of the different functionalities of YouTube or Zoom. However, it was overwhelmingly “one-way” media that were used (83%). The other issue is the possible use of replay or podcast functions. Here also, the attendance figures show that this possibility was widely chosen.

Finally, we should add the significant proportion of Masses broadcast on the radio (8.1%), with respondents particularly mentioning Radio Chrétienne Francophone (RCF). They were mentioned either as the exclusive form or alternating with other Masses. This suggests that we should not forget this medium, which is almost never mentioned in press articles or research.

1.3. A Situation Characterized by Loss¹⁷

In my study, I analyze the evaluation of these Internet Masses and the overall situation of the participants.¹⁸ I shall only mention here the articulation of feelings of deprivation that arose during this period. The vast majority of respondents mentioned several such experiences, including that of “the Mass as a whole” (45.3%), an expression deliberately put forward in order to perceive the overall understanding of the liturgy as a coherent and structured whole. It is theologically fortunate that the absence of other believers is frequently mentioned (a total of 68.7%, including free expressions). For these regular Sunday churchgoers, gathering together is clearly a constitutive part of their personal faith, just as it is constitutive of the Christian faith itself.¹⁹ Not being able to gather is at the very least felt as a loss, or even as spiritual suffering.

16. A. Join-Lambert, “Vers une Église ‘liquide,’” *Études*, no. 4213, 2015/2, 67–78.

17. This is also what dominates articles published during the lockdown: Patrick Prétot, “Vivre la ‘communio spirituelle’: repères pour le discernement,” <https://liturgie.catholique.fr/accueil/la-messe/la-liturgie-eucharistique/302794-communio-spirituelle-fideles-discernement-acces-communio-sacramentelle/> (accessed on 26/10/2020); *Liturgia in Fase 2, Rivista Pastorale Liturgica*, 2020 (numero speciale in pdf); François CassingenaTrévedy, “De la fabrique du sacré à la révolution eucharistique—Quelques Propos sur le retour à la messe” (*Lettres pascales aux amis confinés* n. 7), s.l., 20 May 2020; Alberto Fabio Ambrosio, “Jeûne liturgique,” *La Croix*, 23/03/2020, p. 24; Markus Tymister, “La pandemia. Sfide nuove per la liturgia—più domande che risposte,” *Ecclesia orans*, 37 (2020) 187–192.

18. The data are developed in my article “Les eucharisties catholiques domestiques confinées.”

19. This is one of things in which the interesting article published during the lockdown by Predrag Bukovec insists, “Das Coronavirus als liturgischer V-Effekt,” *Heiliger Dienst* 74 (2020) 1–11, online: https://www.liturgie.at/dl/pKsoJKJKkOmmLJqx4KJK/Bukovec_online.pdf (accessed 26/10/2020).

Knowing that the respondents are regular churchgoers, the percentage of them who report feeling the absence of receiving the Eucharist seems surprisingly low (65.3%, including all comments). One of the main purposes of the Mass is to receive Communion. How should we interpret this lack of any comment on the loss of receiving Communion? We should remember this as a question that needs to be asked of any liturgical pastoral strategy.

Finally, it should be noted that a large number of parish priests did not set up Internet broadcasting of parish Masses. Some others chose not to celebrate Mass at all during the lockdown. Of the examples identified, these same parish priests sometimes pointed their parishioners in the direction of televised broadcasts. But above all, they invited them to engage in the richness of domestic liturgies by sending them (via e-mail, and sometimes via post) practical suggestions and comments. This was an explicit invitation to take advantage of the situation of loss to deepen or discover other dimensions of spiritual life and celebrations of faith.

2. Authentically Domestic Liturgies

Domestic liturgies in the West have been studied neither rigorously nor in-depth.²⁰ This expression is to be understood as referring to collective prayers that are ritualized to a greater or lesser extent, especially prayers within the family or those that may include neighbors and relatives. It also includes popular devotional practices (especially the rosary and the Angelus), prayers structured around the Our Father and the Hail Mary and, less frequently, elements borrowed from the Liturgy of the Hours, mainly the psalms, especially among the seven so-called “penitential” psalms and, possibly, the fifteen so-called “gradual” psalms, which were rarely used.

With the biblical and liturgical renewals of the period after the 1920s, prayers emerged that centered on the reading of biblical texts, and were developed among Catholics in a way that had not been done for many centuries on account of mistrust and even prohibition. There also were Offices for lay people, taken from the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Compline, as promoted for example by Dom Lambert Beauduin (1873–1960) as “family prayer.” He also gave impetus to a great pastoral and spiritual movement which sought to turn the Missal of the Faithful into the prayer book of the whole world.²¹ The value accorded to these domestic liturgies reached its peak at the Second Vatican Council, which gave theological grounding and effective encouragement to liturgies of the Word and also the praying of the Office among the laity. During the lockdown, other media also grew in importance: traditional means such as magazines, newsletters, or even apps such as You Pray, mentioned by several respondents.

20. Especially Andrea Grillo, “Familial Rites and Ecclesial Rites: Anthropological and Theological Perspectives on Their Relationship,” in *The Household of God and Local Households*, 195–207.

21. A. Join-Lambert, “Du Livre d’Heures médiéval au Paroissien du xxe siècle,” *Revue d’Histoire ecclésiastique* 101 (2006) 618–655.

We will deal with these practices in two parts. First, the lockdown has witnessed the emergence of hybrid forms of liturgy through the digital medium. We shall see that the problematic issues are partly similar to the eucharistic liturgies mentioned above. Then there are *offline* domestic liturgies, i.e., those limited to members of the family or of a group *physically* present and locked down together.

2.1. Online Domestic Liturgies other than the Mass

Our survey shows the regular practice of online domestic liturgies during the lockdown. Despite the limitations of the research, the great novelty arose of being able to pray to the Office in virtual communion with religious communities.²² If the KTO channel was already broadcasting two live services per day before the pandemic, the high percentage here (7.2%) suggests the development of a practice. How did people actually pray? It is logical to assume that participation was effective, based on the psalm texts prayed or even sung, together. There were other online liturgies, but to a lesser extent. The following are mentioned: the rosary (especially via KTO's daily broadcast), evening prayer at Taizé by 1.1% of respondents (daily prayer on Facebook Live and Instagram from mid-March to 4 June, with between 25 to 39,000 daily views) and the prayer of praise (within the charismatic movement). Finally, online adoration of the Blessed Sacrament should be noted. The high number of people (9.3%) participating in this totally new rite is astonishing, especially since this way of doing things raises serious theological questions. The question goes beyond the digital medium since eucharistic adoration is not an act of private devotion. Since its origin, it has taken place in a liturgical setting.²³ This is the case when a time of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is integrated into a liturgy (of intercession, healing, praise, and so forth, and of course Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament as such) and this liturgy is broadcast on the Internet or on television. How to film this poses a particularly tricky challenge. A full-screen shot of the host on its own does not have the same significance as a wide-angle shot that allows viewers to "see" it as the congregation sees it. A very wide shot in which the congregation is partly visible symbolically says something else. During this time of lockdown, this is problematic since, by definition, there can be no assembly physically present. In the survey, we note the strong impression made on several respondents of the period of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament during the liturgy in St Peter's Square on 27 March, when the Pope was physically alone. This "pontifical innovation" merits further exploration. This allowed for another way of doing things, with a camera in front of the open tabernacle: this is highly questionable from a theological point of view, for the reasons stated above.

22. For example, from a woman (40–50 years old) who followed the online services of the abbey of Sainte-Foy de Conques (with a community of Premonstratensian brothers of Mondaye): "I hardly knew anything about the liturgy of the hours and the Easter octave, and I enjoyed it so much that I was bowled over."

23. Patrick Prétot, "Liturgie et adoration eucharistique," *Revue Lumen Vitae* 64 (2009) 249–270; ID, "Le renouveau actuel de l'adoration eucharistique," *La Vie Spirituelle* 770 (2007) 205–225.

2.2. Celebrating Autonomously

Domestic liturgies are (were) normally celebrated autonomously, among small groups of family or friends. The lockdown has put great demands on the laity to discover or develop this dimension of their faith. Had it not been for the television media and the Internet, these demands would have certainly been much more extreme. We cannot resort to fiction here or gloss over what did not take place. But the creativity and appropriation of rituals that can be observed in some of the respondents would probably have taken place in greater number had it not been for the “easy way out” of an online practice that apparently builds on an already familiar practice.

The Office of the Church, without specifying either its frequency or intensity, was celebrated by 11.8% of respondents.²⁴ Some opted for Liturgies of the Word, in a version organized in the style of the Sunday Assemblies in the Absence of a Priest (10.6%), or by following a specifically suggested format (5.2%). The diocesan service for catechesis and liturgy of the diocese of Liège, for example, provided numerous aids for celebrating alone at home throughout the lockdown period, whether for couples or for families with children. 5.8% adapted liturgies, and 6% created them. This is far from the percentages of those attending Mass, but neither are these figures negligible. We note a preponderance of these liturgies adapted and created in families with adolescents, especially with older or younger children. It is difficult to assess the role played by priests and bishops in this liturgical self-empowerment of the laity. According to other data collected in a non-systematic way, we can establish a local correlation between these practices and the encouragement by parish priests for people to celebrate their faith in this independent and personally responsible manner in a time of crisis. We should add that 2.1% of respondents mention praying the rosary.

3. Focus on the Celebration of Holy Days and Easter Time: A Place of Creativity

Lockdown was introduced in France and Belgium shortly before Holy Week. The liturgical days of the highest importance and most developed ritual disappeared from the public space. It is important to realize that this situation was completely unprecedented in the history of the Church, and culminated in the previously mentioned celebration in St. Peter's Square on 27 March. How did the Catholic faithful experience these peaks of the liturgical year?²⁵ One might have assumed that the commitment of the faithful would be stronger in this liturgical season, especially as the shock of the first two weeks dissipated and the horizon of a return to “normal” receded. We therefore asked: “Did you celebrate the liturgy in your home in a new way during different times?”

24. On the subject of the Triduum, one person said that he was struck by the practice of the Office of *Tenebrae*.

25. The issue also arises, but differently, in women's religious communities. See Patricia Rumsey, “Liturgy in lockdown: The Paschal Mystery without a presbyter,” *La Croix internationale*, June 22, 2020.

Several answers were possible. Three-quarters of the respondents gave an answer (884 out of 1,200).²⁶ The quantitative results do not allow us to draw any major conclusions, except for the strong focus on Easter Day (75.5%) and Good Friday (70.8%). Among those who did not celebrate are a large number of single people, people who were disoriented by the situation ("I've lost my bearings!" said a 70–80-year-old man), but also people who experienced the dimension of the Holy Week itself in a different way.²⁷ More interesting are the responses to the question asking respondents to tell us about the rites that had the greatest effect on them. On one hand, we found testimonies about broadcasts on television or online, in the same vein as described above. In this respect, respondents mentioned the broadcast of the veneration of the holy crown of thorns at Notre-Dame in Paris on Good Friday. Sometimes technology permitted the unfolding of a vivid imagination, especially during Holy Week.²⁸ But there also were the creations²⁹ of many simple rites, especially around Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, in families with children.³⁰ In addition, some locked-down families said that they "re-started" rituals that they no longer practiced, on the occasion of Easter liturgies.

In this respect, one respondent mentions the practice of saying grace before meals.

The washing of feet clearly took on a central role in the domestic liturgies of Maundy Thursday: reciprocal washing for everyone (both children and parents), washing by parents, by couples, and even "washing feet with my flatmate in lockdown." However, this rite was not taken for granted everywhere.³¹ On both Maundy Thursday and

26. It should not be forgotten that some people were not locked down (very few of those interviewed). I quote one: "Working in a medical environment. I had to work a lot. But my work was inhabited by prayer and these liturgical seasons."

27. For example, this man (60–70 years old, Brussels, locked down as part of a couple): "We listened to Bach's Passion and Oratorio, which brought us into relationship with God much better than some mediocre liturgy." Or again a woman (60–70 years old, Bordeaux): "Personally, I looked for pictures by great painters and wrote prayers on the painting to send to my friends."

28. A woman with pastoral responsibility in Brussels writes: "Holy Week was experienced by our youth group via the Internet. The young people filmed themselves reading the readings, playing a song, symbolising joy or service ... and this contributed to the Holy Week celebrations on YouTube. It was a beautiful way for young people to participate in the Mass, even for those who were on the other side of the world because of being Erasmus students."

29. A woman aged 50–60, however, expressed her opposition to any innovation: "The Church's liturgy has been established gradually and inspired by the Holy Spirit for centuries and in my opinion, we cannot invent new forms of domestic liturgy." Such extreme opinions are very marginal within the survey.

30. The data collected indicate the composition of the locked-down entity (confined cell children, people with a cognitive or psychological or mental disorder).

31. This is illustrated by this testimony from a woman (30–40 years old, Brussels): "On Holy Thursday, I washed the feet of my children and my husband (a non-believer), creating surprise and amusement. For the rest, it was a void, the absence of rites, the sadness of feeling the lack of community, especially on the Holy Saturday Easter Vigil."

Easter Day, meals were celebrated in the “Jewish way,” as mentioned by some families.³² Other respondents simply shared bread, after prayers of praise and blessing. Several did the same on the evening of Holy Saturday or on Easter Day, by sharing bread and, in some instances, wine as well.³³ In the area of food and according to another symbolism rooted in the spiritual tradition, several respondents fasted (especially during or at the end of Holy Week), including together with other fasters, thus underlining the ritual dimension of their fast.

The Stations of the Cross and the Office of the Cross were clearly the third most practiced group of rituals. Two different rites were merged here, corresponding with two liturgical offices in “normal” parish life. In fact, as soon as there was no longer any question of Stations of the Cross via externally imposed methods, people mixed the ritual elements (traditional stations, veneration of the Cross, reading of the Passion, and even liturgy of the anointing or the burial in the tomb from the Eastern tradition) into a single liturgy. With their children, some made traveling Stations of the Cross in their house or flat. Technological means sometimes also allowed for beautiful interactions within a community. For example, one person noted: “Stations of the Cross pre-recorded by parishioners from different parishes in our community of all ages. Parishioners who are usually shy and reserved suddenly emerged on the scene as readers for this occasion. It was beautiful.” In another example: “The Stations of the Cross came out on Zoom thanks to a slide show with a commentary from the deacon and several parishioners”.³⁴ Symbolic displays appeared on houses, but also on the church, around the “cross for Good Friday, on the church door, around our parish priest’s door and decorated with flowers on Easter morning. What a nice touch! We had the same for Pentecost with doves.”³⁵

The fourth rite often mentioned is that of light for the Easter Vigil or for Easter Day. People made extensive use of this very accessible and meaningful symbol.³⁶ It ranged from multiple candles in the home, to a single large candle, to lanterns. There were static rites, but also processional liturgies from one room to another, as in the liturgical entrance of the Great Vigil. One family took out and lit their children’s baptismal candles. Others mention a fire in the fireplace or in a brazier in their garden. Some families got up early on Sunday and anticipated the sunrise in order to greet the Lord “the

32. “*Seder* meal, making unleavened bread, bitter herbs. Stronger link between the texts and the meal prepared by the family, through the step by step explanation of the liturgy to our teenagers.” (Woman, 40–50 years old, Caen)

33. “Holy Thursday with the blessing of bread and wine and sharing as a couple.” (Woman, 50–60 years old)

34. Another testimony from Arlon (Belgium): “Creative Stations of the Cross with the participation of every family via video conference.”

35. Woman 50–60 years old, Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium).

36. “The celebration of the Easter Vigil, as a family, with (for once) the possibility of introducing our children to the ritual of the fire outdoors and then going back inside our house (our parish priest had refused to do this for thirteen years). More broadly, it was an intense moment of preparation with the whole family. Each person was more involved in the readings, the psalmody, the writing of the universal prayer intentions...” (male, 40–50 years old, Fontenay-le-Fleury).

rising sun who comes to visit us” (according to liturgical tradition).³⁷ In contrast to the abundance of signs of light, only five people mention a paschal rite using water (in memory of the baptismal liturgy).

Several dioceses and movements called for the joy of the resurrection to be communicated through banners displayed in windows at Easter and before on Palm Sunday. Several respondents did so, for example, especially by getting their children to draw or illustrate the two liturgical cries: the Palm Sunday “Hosanna” and the Easter “alleluia.”

It is worth noting here how much all these rituals express deep anthropological realities. This is also the case for several rituals around Palm Sunday. According to custom, people burned the palms from the previous year, and some innovated by imposing the ashes on themselves within the lockdown. Some mention internal debates on whether or not to celebrate these rituals in private.³⁸ For instance, this woman (40–50 years old) from Bordeaux mentioned “making palms using plants from the flat...” There was another ritual creation from a family who: “picked a tree of branches on Palm Sunday and decorated it at Easter.” In addition to the televised blessing, some respondents mentioned a blessing by their parish priest on Facebook Live. Finally, some respondents mentioned the physical procession of a priest through the streets to bless the branches and houses.³⁹ A theologian who responded to the questionnaire added a comment on the theology of blessings (and the training of priests): “I think what I questioned most was the Palm Sunday blessing and the remark by the celebrant that he would go into parishioners’ houses (after the end of lockdown) at their request to “really bless” our palms. We were verging on a magical understanding of the ritual there...”⁴⁰ This is a good question, which does not skirt around the current difficulties around sacramentality.

To integrate children into these liturgies, several families “cobbled together” supports, decorations, or stagings, with Lego, building blocks, drawings, Playmobil toys, and so forth, often using very simple materials such as paper (and on one occasion Babybel cheese wax to make a Paschal candle).⁴¹ Some adults also lived this liturgical period

37. A young person also tells of: “Easter night live with other young people and ending with the sunrise.”

38. For example: “Blessing the branches as a family (with extensive extended family debate on the validity of it!) and displaying a giant Palm Sunday poster in our window.”

39. This initiative of the priests of the pastoral unit of Ramillies (diocese of Brussels) has had a strong local and wider impact. Three respondents from L’Isle-Adam (diocese of Pontoise) were struck by a similar blessing, with their parish priest processing down the street with the Blessed Sacrament on Easter Sunday.

40. I would like to point out another theologically strange innovation, but which lies outside the field of our investigation (in Quebec City): “On Palm Sunday, our parish priest gave our old palm branches a new blessing. I found it odd not to have a new one, but I really liked the idea.” (Woman, 30–40 years old)

41. “We experienced the key times of Holy Week and Easter as a family, with materials adapted for our six year old daughter. We made a fresco together with our hand and footprints to tell the story of Holy Week, and we also had a big poster to colour in for the whole of Lent, we experienced Stations of the Cross that we made ourselves (laminated colourings displayed in different rooms of the house). We celebrated the Easter vigil live on the radio with a liturgy adapted for children and finally a small family liturgy of our own on Easter Sunday.” (female, 30–40 years old, pastoral unit of Fléron, Belgium)

with their hands, like the woman (50–60 years old) who created “a translation of Holy Week through mosaic.” The survey clearly establishes a link between creativity and the presence of children in the locked-down group, especially children of primary school age (and, therefore, also of catechetical age). A form of pressure or urgency to act emerged in families, especially as suggestions for children’s liturgies on the Internet were few and far between. There is something to be learned from the fact that this sense of having been “abandoned” was felt by many families with children. One respondent wrote on this subject: “We would have been grateful if children’s Masses in French had been offered on the Internet. I couldn’t find any, whereas in Austria, for example, there were plenty.” Most of the respondents locked down with their families, however, emphasized positive experiences, which were sometimes very powerful in human and spiritual terms,⁴² but they also were very irregular due to the concrete difficulties of living in lockdown.

4. What Lessons can be Learned for a Post-COVID Liturgical Ministry?

4.1. *Drawn From the Assessment by Those Surveyed*

Two questions invited us to take a step back after this extraordinary and humanly difficult time for many people, in Belgium and in France. “In addition to this ritual dimension did you discover or deepen a more personal dimension of the spiritual life?” Five possible answers were suggested (as well as a free expression): meditation or reading the Bible (50.7%), rosary-type prayer, Jesus Prayer (therefore something repetitive and simple) (39.6%), intercessory prayer (31.3%), reading of a spiritual author (29.1%), and prayer (21.4%).⁴³ The free expressions mainly mention in addition: the Office (1.9%), discovering communities⁴⁴ and prayer groups (1.7%), and the importance of relationships, including reconnecting with people (1.3%). A few people also mentioned video teachings, homilies, religious songs and music, reflecting on life and religion, and personal development. It is worth noting that only 1.9% (i.e., 19 people) say that they have made no spiritual discovery or deepening.

42. These testimonies: “During the Liturgy of the Word, experienced each time as a family, it was very moving to allow oneself to be taught by one’s own children in the sharing of the Word” after meditation, at the time normally given over to the homily (woman, 50–60 years old, L’Isle-Adam). “Taking time with the children (2, 4, 8, and 11 years old) to explain to them these different important times, their chronology, the Sunday texts,... in short, a real catechism as we had never taken the time to do it before, making a loaf and sharing it as a family at the end of our celebration, discovering new Christian singing groups, new songs...” (woman, 30–40 years old, pastoral unit of Huy, Belgium).

43. The notion of prayer is broad and can go beyond the specific aspect of the spiritual tradition in use here. This includes the 2.3% who added “personal prayer,” including in or in connection with nature (1%).

44. “I discovered beautiful places and communities that were very much alive, with a magnificent liturgy.” (woman aged 60–70)

After this question, respondents were asked to describe in words their liturgical or ritual experience during the lockdown.⁴⁵ Five words were suggested, also with the intention of opening up the field of free expression to a large extent. Many of the respondents chose both positive and negative words, thus showing the difficulty of evaluating this unprecedented situation, which was probably not experienced in the same way throughout the 3 months.

The word “lack” was the most frequently used, but only by 50% of respondents. The other two words in the more negative register are “loneliness” (24.9%) and “painful” (only 14.1%). These figures seem low, given that such a situation physically cut off the faithful from their community, their place of worship, and their rituals. The more positive words received quite high percentages, thus showing a form of spiritual and ritual resilience: “discovery” (42.2%), “enrichment,” (38.9%) and “fraternity” (26.6%).

The very many free expressions confirm this tendency and even amplify it. They have been grouped into several categories reflecting a wide range of experiences and feelings. The positive expressions dominate to a very large extent (there are twice as many). The groups of significant words are serenity (2.1%) and interiority (1.4%), creativity and openness (1.6%), and solidarity (1.2%). Positive appreciation (including “joy”) is not, however, entirely an expression of bliss, since it brings together both discoveries and reservations; for example, we hear of, “concern about an often very impoverished virtual world” added to “fraternity” and “enrichment.” The negative expressions relate equally to the way in which the lockdown was personally felt (discouragement, letting things slide, difficulty, tiredness, sadness, lassitude, overwhelmed, etc.) and to the appreciation of what was being lived in the church: from disappointment, frustration, anxiety, etc., to a very severe judgment of abandonment, spiritual poverty, “disastrous,” “rejection,” “non-sense,” and “anger.” Finally, 17 people (1.5%) emphasized how this time was a time of questioning and reflection.⁴⁶

Thus, from the people themselves, there emerges the real support deriving from biblical texts and from the maintaining of relationships as well as possible, through liturgies connection to the Christian community, whatever means were used. With regard to relationships, this dimension also became something of value “in the vacuum.” Their absence or deficiency helped them to be appreciated as vital. A third lesson came from the opportunity seized by many of these Catholics who engage in regular Sunday practice to discover other places (thanks to the Internet) and other forms of prayer.

4.2. *From Mass on the radio and television to the Internet as a multiplier*

“The Mass on television has become, in the countries where it is practiced, the paradigmatic place of the Church’s entry into modern communications, with all the problems that this raises.”⁴⁷ These words of Guy Lapointe from before the Internet era underline a profound

45. This and the following paragraph are taken from the article “Les eucharisties catholiques domestiques confinées.”

46. A man (40–50 years old) writes: “Rediscovering and questioning the place of the liturgy in my life: habit or real source of life? Time in the desert to renew the practice of my faith.” A woman (40–50 years old) writes: “It makes me question my place in the Church a lot and if I still want to keep a place ... I may be looking for something else.”

47. Guy Lapointe, “L’espace liturgique éclaté,” 82.

change. According to him, this first historical moment linked to the televised Mass had two characteristics that affected our sense of ritual. It was characterized by the hypertrophy of the sense of sight, the part retention of the sense of hearing, but the discarding of the senses of smell, touch, and taste. It also caused a reconfiguration of the notion of assembly. The person *in front of* their television (or radio) was connected to a community physically gathered in a place and a time that the viewer-hearer had not chosen. The most important thing was what lay *beyond* the television. Furthermore there was no concern about the manner in which people were actually celebrating at home.

During the period of lockdown, alongside the traditional television Mass—reduced to its most simplified expression, filmed in a studio—technological innovations emerged thanks to the web. This would mean our taking a new step, quite involuntarily, simply carried along by the current of liquid modernity in its digital dimension. The moment in which we currently find ourselves break up eucharistic assemblies through the appearance of an “unlimited” offer on the web. The issue is therefore totally different. The question is no longer *what lies beyond* the computer screen, but *who* is in front of it and *how* relationships are formed between those close to one another (physically and emotionally) who are *in front of* the screen. The high number of people who visited different places of liturgical celebration during the 3 months gives one to think: What kind of assembly are we talking about, then? Should we be talking about the empowerment of the baptized or about disordered subjectivism? In any case, the lockdown will have demanded of all Catholics that they enter into the deep meaning of the liturgical reform promoted by the Second Vatican Council. Reduced to staying at home—alone or with others—all were “forced” to take an active approach to celebrate Sunday.

We have noted above that other liturgical and spiritual initiatives have been circulating on the web, whether in parish networks or those of religious congregations. It must be stressed here that the Internet alone has not contributed to the massive choice for online Eucharists. Technically speaking, people had other choices. It remains to be seen whether they were aware of these alternatives, and whether priests, deacons, and lay people in church ministries directed them toward these other possibilities.

4.3. *Reduced to the Eucharist*

There were great opportunities for locked-down people to celebrate by themselves and for themselves, as an alternative or complement to the Eucharist. However, there is nothing obvious about this. The figures from our survey speak for themselves. 51.3% of the respondents only attended Mass, via all the media (television, Internet, and radio) combined. It is not a question here of criticizing this way of celebrating in troubling circumstances, but of questioning this limitation to the virtual Eucharist,⁴⁸ without any other form of celebration.

We should note here that the composition of the locked-down group contributes to the exclusivity of the Eucharist, through the presence or absence of young people and children. In fact, less than half of the single people and a little more than half of the couples chose this option. There is no impact here. However, there is a clear difference in cases

48. To this is added a ritual reduction of the Eucharist itself, as analyzed by M. Steinmetz, “Liturgies in times of crisis,” 183–188.

where there were teenagers or children. Only a third of the households concerned limited themselves to the Eucharist. This shows in part that this actually very passive form of “reduced” online liturgy was not seen as being well suited to “participation proportionate to their age” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 19) or at least as being sufficient.

However, the question goes beyond young people and children. The great German liturgist Balthasar Fischer worked all his life to get Catholicism out of a tendency toward what he called a eucharistic monopoly and, thus, a reduction of liturgical life to the sole practice of the Mass. For him, it was impossible for the Eucharist to be the center of the Christian life if there were no other liturgies in daily life and in proximity to it, in all directions. The liturgical reform promoted by the Second Vatican Council led completely in the direction of the development of a “liturgical life.” The lockdown has only confirmed that this pastoral work is far from being completed.

4.4. The Timid Emergence of *Ecclesiolae* (Domestic Churches)

This predominance of the Eucharist—which was exclusive for half of the respondents—opens up the question of non-eucharistic domestic liturgies. These liturgies, whether online or not, should have taken place in the life of every household, whatever its composition, by being engaged with in a new or renewed way. This taking on themselves of the celebratory dimension of their faith by baptized believers was undoubtedly a major challenge—from the point of view of ritual—in times of lockdown. Our survey demonstrates that this was a reality in small but significant proportions. Several respondents reported personal “discoveries” here, with their spouse or family (this was also true for some groups of locked-down adults). Domestic churches thus emerged, at least temporarily. The question of their sustainability depends both on the quality of the experience and on the encouragement coming from pastoral leaders. The November renewal of lockdown has unfortunately come as a test of the achievements of the Spring.

The challenge of these *ecclesiolae*, whether within families, religious communities, or consisting of a few neighbors, seems obvious as we emerge from this period. It is nothing less than living the Christian vocation that unfolds in proximity and in daily life (“every day” according to Acts 2:46), as sketched out in the ideal-type given at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles: “They were faithful to the apostles’ teaching, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.” (Acts 2:42) The survey showed the great variety of practices which nourished the people during these 3 months. We also saw, in contrast, how many people were disoriented by the situation, including priests. The urgency of a liturgical ministry aimed at rendering the baptized more responsible for domestic liturgies appears to be a matter of urgency. The liturgical and biblical formation is an essential pastoral priority to “equip” the baptized.

This will oblige many people to discard their habits, including priests who will have to encourage and accompany these *ecclesiolae*, without paternalism and with a sincere detachment. Finally, it should be noted that the life and outreach of these *ecclesiolae* are not limited to more or less ritualized prayer.⁴⁹ What is at stake is nothing less than a maturing of faith and the development of spiritual life.

49. See Dario Vitali, “La Chiesa al tempo del covid-19. Prove di lettura,” *La Rivista del Clero Italiano* 101 (2020), 424–445; A. Join-Lambert, “Leçons du confinement pour l’Église,” *Études* 4275 (2020) 69–90, here 87–90.

4.5. An Active Participation Still in the Process of Becoming, the Challenge of Coming Close

During the lockdown and the months of more or less partial lockdown, it is certain that there were a number of “missed meetings,” as many wrote with regard to the collective ecclesial level⁵⁰ and as our survey reveals at the individual level. However, the survey also shows a real liturgical dynamism on the part of those who were locked down. The one-sidedness of certain assessments therefore calls for a great deal of nuance. It is more likely that lockdown has only laid bare or exacerbated what existed before.

What was clear was the disruption of the sensitive and affective dimensions of the liturgy. One lesson to be learned from the lockdown is to make it a priority topic for liturgical reflections⁵¹ and pastoral training. Our survey showed that this was not only the case for a small number of regular Sunday Mass-goers. Almost all of them mentioned that they could not do without in-person assemblies. This is also in line with the testimony of many priests active in the parish. But how can we support the formation of small local groups?

This future cannot unfold without a resolute commitment of priests, deacons, catechists, and other lay people with pastoral responsibility to encourage, accompany, and enhance liturgies in the *ecclesiolae*. Fraternity (with those around us and with Christ) emerges as a major factor in the vitality of the faith nourished by liturgical life, which cannot be reduced to the sacraments alone.⁵² This requires the development of skills that not everyone necessarily has, as well as tools.⁵³ For other baptized people, it commits them to change their inner and outer attitude, with a renewed attention to all those who are close to them. For church leaders, it probably calls into question centripetal pastoral and liturgical options that have guided the evolution of the Catholic Church in Belgium and France for three decades.

The lockdown has highlighted a deficit of responsibility on the part of Catholics in the celebration of their faith, but also the ability of many to assume this dimension of their lives. An entire liturgical pastoral ministry is called for in order to find new orientations. Without necessarily denying what has been done, Catholics are invited to rediscover ritual prayer in small groups, in “fraternities of proximity,” in *ecclesiolae*.⁵⁴ This will increase the places where Catholics experience the reality of Christ’s promise, the very

50. See Nicolas Buttet, Interview in *L’Écho*, 16/07/2020, 32–35: “The Church has completely missed its appointment with history.”

51. A. Join-Lambert, “Une liturgie désirable. Quatre clés pour un discernement pastoral,” in Id. (ed.), *Donner du goût à nos liturgies*, Namur, Ed. Lumen Vitae, “Trajectoire” 31, 2018, 35–61.

52. M. Steinmetz refers to an “effective sacramental capillarity” in the article cited above, 188–190.

53. The following book is still very useful in concrete terms and also inspiring for the development of formation: Enzo Biemmi, *Compagnons de voyage. Itinéraires de formation pour animateur de catéchèse d’adultes*, Bruxelles/Montréal/Montrouge, Lumen vitae/Novalis/Bayard, 2010.

54. More than 53 French dioceses have made the explicit and resolute choice for proximity, by making these “fraternities of proximity” a pastoral priority. We offer as examples the dioceses of Amiens, Créteil, Tulle, Besançon, Beauvais, and Reims.

foundation of Christian prayer: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). Liturgical resources already exist, such as the Liturgy of the Hours (probably still needing to be simplified or adapted), Taizé prayer, liturgies of praise, or even the vigils promoted by the *Ecclesiola* movement and other initiatives. Liturgies around the proclamation of the Word will undoubtedly be even more vital in the future.⁵⁵ Liturgical life before and after Sundays—which will themselves be eucharistic as far as possible—will be the witness of a living church.⁵⁶

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55. This also reopens an ecumenical horizon that was seen to be closed, as pointed out by P. Bukovec, “Das Coronavirus als liturgischer V-Effekt,” 9–10.

56. In the sense of testimony, but also understood as an indicator of a broader and more vital reality.