

Fr Andy's Reflection

THE REAL PRESENCE WITHIN A EUCHARISTIC COMMUNITY

It is encouraging to discover that the lockdown has had a positive effect on the religious nature of England. One in four people have viewed or listened to a religious service during the lockdown period and 48% of people are now praying in one form or another. When the virus first reached our shores I was struck with mixture of amusement and surprise when the churches closed their doors before the pubs. But I can see now the wisdom in which the Church was willing to lead the way, rather than trail behind being stuck in its ways, like it is usually accused of. Closing the doors of the Church was in fact a very selfless act which must have taken some courage. Depriving the faithful of the Eucharist is no light matter and especially when the Church was about to celebrate its glorious highlight of the year, Holy Week, especially the Easter Vigil. There are the obvious monetary sacrifices that have been made too – nearly eight weeks of practically no collections does make a difference to the everyday running of parishes. There are also a number of significant collections that were due over the last few weeks or so, including Support for Life and the Good Shepherd collection that goes towards supporting vocations to the priesthood. Some priests have also had to sacrifice a personal financial loss in doing without the Easter offerings which are traditionally a gift of the people to the priests of the parish. Jesus said “I will lay down my life for my sheep.” By forfeiting our weekly and weekday Masses, our gathering as a community, sharing the sign of peace, being nourished by the Eucharist, meeting for a coffee in the parish rooms, letting go of weekly the collections and even to our commitment to support worthy charities, we are “saving lives” – a sacrifice that we all share in as a Eucharistic community.

We are blessed in our parishes of St Joseph's and St Mary Magdalene's that a significant number of parishioners contribute by direct debit and I have had a few people sending in cheques as well as people dropping offertory envelopes through the door. But these things fade into insignificance when we look at the way our communities our functioning under these lockdown conditions. There has been an overwhelming outpouring of love and care made very real through the parish WhatsApp, the weekly bulletin on the website, people sending emails and the good old chat on the telephone. I must have made over a hundred phone calls to the sick and housebound in the parish. Looking after the most vulnerable is paramount to what a “Warm, welcoming, outgoing, Eucharistic community” is all about, quoting from our parish mission statement.

Some of the hardest-to-hear stories of this pandemic have come from Britain's care homes; the children and families who have been separated from their parents for weeks unable to see them before they die; of staff paid a pittance for invaluable, and life threatening work, struggling to cope with the scale of the loss. Despite Boris Johnson's celebratory remarks that we have “past the peak” in this crisis, once again it is as if the care homes do not count, because the situation in care homes is getting worse. There has been more than 4,300 deaths in care home in a fortnight and is still rising. But this is not just about care homes it's about how our elderly and vulnerable loved ones are treated by the social order. The vulnerable do not have to be elderly and having a disability doesn't discriminate age; though of course, as one gets older the likelihood of becoming disabled increases. People with disabilities often have to rely on professional carers for intimate support with everyday tasks, in their own home or in care homes. They simply cannot be “shielded” from the outside world and so it is critical that those who care for them (and love them) are able to access ample protective equipment and have regular testing made available, including members of families. Otherwise, the most vulnerable will be among

those put most at risk. Loved ones need to be close when a relative dies and able to express their love as they leave this world. The appalling support and the neglect shown in care homes around the country have brought it home to me how important our vulnerable and elderly community are. It seems that we are living in a society whose attitude and approach to the care of the elderly is so wrong. It appears that those who rely on professional care are somehow seen as having a diminished right to a flourishing and full life. The majority of our parishioners, both in St Joseph's and St Mary Magdalene's are over 70 years. They deserve the best; and I thank God that our parishes have shown such a generous spirit of care and love given to the elderly and vulnerable; and more than ever during this crisis.

It is not easy these days, even before the lockdown for a priest or chaplain to visit care homes without having a purposeful reason for visiting a particular individual, for example administering the sacrament of the sick or holy communion. We have a huge number of vulnerable people in our parishes and many during the lockdown have become self-isolating. Though physical contact, even between families is not allowed in the "everyday" practicalities of life, it is a completely different thing when a vulnerable person becomes critically ill and in the danger of dying – they need loved ones close – a real presence. But it is not just about the elderly. I have come to a newer and clearer understanding in my work as a chaplain to a mainly Mental Health hospital. Even though on the whole I am trying to work from home, I often get called into hospital to see a patient, particularly those who are not ill at ease when it comes to speaking on the phone. So there is a need to physically be present on the wards and talk face to face with a patient. On a recent visit to a particular patient, I found afterwards, that there was a queue of other patients waiting to see me and wanting a chat. It made me realise how "cut off" these vulnerable people were from their families and friends. Visitors were not allowed, even by close family members. While I was in the hospital I went to another ward and talked to the ward manager about whether there was any patient who would like to talk to the chaplain. He said, "Father Andy, your very presence creates a sense of peace on the ward, when you come, you don't know how much that means – not just the patients, but for us too." Some patients can be on the ward for weeks, even months and that is such a long time without visitors and seeing their own family members. As I pointed out earlier, talking on the phone is not for everyone, especially when over 80% of all communication is non-verbal. One patient who wanted to "talk" to me did not say more than a couple of words, but just sat quietly with me for a few minutes and I finished off our time together with a blessing, for which they were so grateful for. Another patient simply wanted to touch me, to feel someone else's presence – I was all toggled up with apron, gloves and mask of course! It showed me the importance of just being there – a presence (of a sense of peace and stability) in an uncertain and fearful world.

PS I read about the number of people who have put in their window, alongside the rainbow and the "I love the NHS" signs, and the guy who has put up a more political message, "Tory voters – at the next election. Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save lives."

A local decorator is paid £300 to repaint the interior of a church. He is too mean to spend it all on paint, so he dilutes the paint with water. When he sees that the thinned paint will not cover all the walls, he dilutes the paint even further. But he still needs more and so dilutes the paint one more time. Just then a voice booms from the heavens – "Stop! Repaint and thin no more!"