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Stephen Bullivant, *Catholicism in the time of Coronavirus*, Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Catholic Ministries 2020, pp. 113.

Once again, The Church finds itself in a storm that has forced her to shut her doors. Plunged into a pandemic crisis like before which as usual is a time of uncertainty, Catholics like other Christians are faced with a spiritual trial, getting involved in religious activities, attending mass, and what's more starved of the sacraments. But there is still an opportunity lingering to be greatly utilized as means of communication in parishes. This could also be an opportunity to harness the power of the new media and help in evangelization like never before.

The above topic is addressed by Stephen Bullivant in his new book. The author is a Professor of Theology and the Society of Religion. He holds doctorates in Theology (Oxford, 2009) and Sociology (Warwick, 2019). He is the Director of the Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society at St. Mary's University, UK. He is a Fellow of the Word on Fire Institute and a former Oxford researcher. He has published ten books.

The book is divided into 4 chapters followed by an afterword, appendix, and notes; the foreword is written by Bishop Robert Barron; sources from books, the internet, and the Catholic Church. Notably, the whole process, from pitch to execution, happened over the space of twelve days: Monday, March 30 to Friday, April 10, 2020. The book contains a collection of "structured thoughts" about the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, and their likely impacts upon the Church's pastoral and evangelistic mission, focusing on the Catholic Church in the US and the UK. Chapter 2 has a table on the annual average percentage change in typical Sunday mass attendance in England, Wales, and 22 US (arch) dioceses.

Although Bullivant drew instructive comparisons to global crisis like the Spanish Flu or avian flu to our current coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic, and found them medically and historically interesting; he agreed that comparing symptoms is not what is most helpful in considering our current situation, attributing the most salient similarities between COVID-19 and other such outbreaks throughout human history to be: staggering cost in terms of lives and livelihoods; psychological, physical, economical, emotional, and spiritual anguish; and the tension put on all, especially those whose calling is to serve people of essential duties.

Recalling the pestilence of the mid-third century, Bullivant highlighted the role such pandemics played in the ultimate Christianization of the Roman Empire; attributing such rise of Christianity to Christians' response to pandemics in ways that

were different from other people: while others fled to the countryside, Christians stayed behind to care for those in need, regardless of their faith. He also recalled that Christians again came to the help of the needy when a new plague-ravaged parts of the Empire early the next century. Considering all these points, it is perhaps not surprising that the author's opinion is that this selfless heroism won Christians both admiration and converts. Having proven themselves pious and religious in a way that glorified the God of the Christians, pagans were likely to convert once the pandemic passed.

Bullivant stressed the importance of charitable and selfless works to be done in troubled times, both individually and collectively as Christians. He recalled the countless charities and supports rendered during the best of times and noted how much more such vital services are needed now. His exact words, "If ever there was a time to adopt Philippians 2:4 as one's personal mantra 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others' it is the present".

The author explained how the developed world handles a pandemic, expressing that the diseased and dying are not left to die in the streets. Instead, medical staff and other essential workers work tirelessly to save lives. He further explained how even the US Navy hospital ships were docked in Los Angeles and New York; football stadiums and exhibition centers across Britain were being converted into field hospitals at the moment he wrote the book. He credited the trends of the developed world as a model set by Christians by quoting Bart Ehrman who said that modern sensitivities, values, and ethics have all been radically affected by the Christian tradition; with the conquest of Christianity, billions of people may never have embraced the idea that society should serve the marginalized or be concerned with the well-being of the needy.

Bullivant computed facts on the annual average percentage change in typical Sunday Mass attendance between 2012 and 2017 in England, Wales, and 22 US (arch) dioceses. From the data, most attendance dropped and he considered the chaos of Brexit, immigration clampdowns, and sexual abuse revelations in the US to be factors to have resulted in attendance drop in spite of the COVID-19 crisis. But more theoretically, he reasoned three main pandemic related factors to likely impact Mass attendance negatively: Firstly, the fact that people are dying and that Catholic Mass-goers are significantly older than the wider population which are over the age of 70. It is roughly this age group who are at a higher risk of dying should they contract the virus; and as recorded by the author, a 2009 study estimated the average age of US priests to be sixty-three (which had declined since 1970 by twenty-eight). Secondly, the number of migrants coming into America, England, and Wales will reduce greatly in number; the implication is that fewer people will attend mass. As Bullivant opined, The Catholic Church in America has been known as a communion of immigrants. He further explained that the American Catholic community is certainly a net beneficiary of immigration in terms of laity, clergy, and religiosity. Thirdly, the habitual attendance of Mass for reasons like: some last

attended a long time ago; some vaguely feel they ought to attend or even forced to and are unable to tell if they don't want to attend anymore; some realize they don't especially miss it after a period of not going to Mass. As analyzed by Bullivant, not everyone who sits in Mass on a Sunday does so fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and at least to the best of their knowledge enriched by its effect. He further expressed fear that the third factor will hit all parishes to some extent.

Recalling how St. Charles Borromeo, the Bishop of Milan, had handled the plague that descended on the city in 1575: how he sold his own possessions to fund the relief effort, formed and equipped hospitals and quarantine houses, availed jobs when people were getting unemployed (similar to what's happening today), strictly adhered to social-distancing while effectively carrying out his good works, having outdoor altars erected all around the town where mass was said daily, carried out door-to-door confessions, and home administering sacraments at the doorstep. But in contrast, as Bullivant highlighted, Clergy and religion do not place themselves as main first responders as before. He revealed, today's priests, religious sisters, and deacons rather are under lockdown with the rest of us instead of fighting on the frontlines in the current battle.

Bullivant regarded live streaming of Masses, such as those offered by Bishop Barron and Word on Fire, as significant given the times we live in and the need for inventing substitutive means to say Mass to the faithful. However, he joined people with the notion that live streaming a Mass at home is not the same as being there in person. Whether live streamed or not the important thing is that vital spiritual works of the Church are continuing; private Masses are being said in churches or chapels around the world. Thus, live streamed or not, Bullivant holds the view that the Mass is real in itself no matter if the faithful actively participate or pay full attention. He pointed out the live streamed extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing delivered by Pope Francis on March 27 to a deserted St. Peter's Square while millions watched at home.

Still, in the spirit of discussing creative and inventing ways of running parishes, Bullivant highlighted the use of the internet and digital technology. He went beyond having a parish website where Mass time can be uploaded and the faithful attend Mass online, or a link to download the bulletin; he also proposed parishes should create a broader communication plan, including social media, email, text messaging, and online offering.

Bullivant considered the digital revolution we are experiencing at the moment to seem to promise a golden age of evangelistic opportunity. He established the fact that The Church has been at the frontline in adopting technological innovations and utilizing them to good work in God's vineyard, referencing the instance the Vatican put Pope Leo XVIII on film in 1896 and launched an international radio station; in 1957, Pius XIII spoke on TV; the Catholic Church being early adopters of the internet launched the Vatican website in late 1995; and the recent Pope's

use of social media. Surely, the Catholic Church has institutionalized herself in the digital space long before now and continues to do so as Bullivant has proven.

Conclusively, the book as quoted by Bishop Robert Barron was designed to be insightful and encouraging, shedding light on the spiritual implications of the coronavirus and offering Catholics a unique roadmap for this challenging time. Interestingly, the book was not only written few months after the global outbreak of the coronavirus, but also while the world still battles with the virus.

Bullivant's speculations are reasonable, probably well informed, but that doesn't mean it's the true cause of mass attendance dropped between 2012–2017; nor likely to impact Mass attendance negatively in what he termed pandemic-related factors. Nevertheless, I do think the factors are very likely factual and should be paid attention to least, as the author stated, when the dust finally settles on the COVID-19 crisis, dioceses discover they've been fast-forwarded by at least several years when it comes to the problem with being left with fewer priests and laypeople.

Given the anticipatory nature of the book and its post-COVID-19 recommendations, clergies, pastors, parish leaders, and committed faithful are most recommended as any other interested person, to read and beware of the factors detailed by the author and prepare for the impact of these factors on their local communities and parishes.