

## WHAT ARE WE MISSING?

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**Not for all Christians, but for many the Sunday assembly of the Church is the pivotal point of the week. But what happens now, as no Sunday mass takes place? What is the purpose of Sunday mass? And are we really left with nothing when the church is closed? The following article calls your attention to some special aspects to take into consideration for this special Lent (and perhaps beyond that, Easter time) of 2020.**

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.” (Amos 8:11)

The word of the prophet Amos, in the translation by Martin Buber, has accompanied me for many years during Lent. Now, in March 2020, it is tangible that this announcement of God is not just a poetic Bible verse. The church services have been canceled, the parish houses closed, events canceled... There is no hunger for bread, but what we had and what now is literally no longer accessible—the Sunday service, baptisms, assemblies, meetings, the daily mass—that is missing. The extent of the Corona epidemic, but also its impact on our life as Christians makes many ask what the meaning of all of this is, what it says to us.

In his dramatic poem, as he called it, “Walk about the Villages,” Nobel Prize winner Peter Handke already in 1981 showed the desolation of the villages and the churches in an impressive image. He characterizes the churches, which are empty in the middle of the villages, with the following words: “Dogs come running into the churches and drink the holy water basins empty...” The holy water basins at the

church doors, emptied in our days due to the great danger of infection, remind us of this. Rudolf Pesch, who at the time this drama was first enacted was Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Freiburg, quoted this bizarre scene in his lecture. He wanted to awaken us from our naive pastoral optimism, wanted to make us listen well. Hadn't the point already in its core been reached that the churches stayed desolate—long before the Robert Koch Institute closed its doors? Hadn't the depreciation of church services long preceded their cancellation?

### **What are we really missing?**

But what is it that we are missing? Quite simply, coming together. Pope Benedict called Christianity “a social charism.” In contrast to the great eastern currents of religions, such as what Buddhism represents, biblical revelation has always been skeptical of too much spirituality, too much of spirit, inwardness, sinking into contemplation, feelings and pious talkativeness. “Chilling in the herb garden,” “work-life-balance according to Benedict,” “days of discovering a source, for God-seekers ready for a holiday,” “the happiness of serenity”—all these are book titles or events in church houses. They are rather cheap imitations of an actually serious search for God. Perhaps it is good that the crisis slows things down here, too.

Judaism, with which our faith began, has discovered another path. It is doing as God instructs that is the path to the knowledge of God. God remains a mystery, but we can know his commandments and what his will is for us. Faith lies not in my knowing something about God, but that I know something about my duties towards God.

As a Jew, Jesus lived in a experience of millennia by his people. He knew that for this demanding life, man needs guidance, advice, guidelines, and above all helpers—the brother, the sister. Thomas Aquinas simply uses the word *auxilium*, “help”, for grace. I cannot inhale the grace of God like a spray for good air in the room, and it also does not have its seat in me like a gene does. It comes to me from outside of me, through people who share my life with me, who have to help me, who take care that I don't get lost or into trouble, who cheer me up, who correct me.

### **The Path of the Assembly**

Here begins the unique path of the assembly. “If your brother/another member of the church sins against you, go and reprove him in private! (...) If he does not listen to you, then take one or two with you, so that the whole matter can be decided by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he does not listen to them either, then

tell the community! But if he does not listen to the community either, then let him be to you as a heathen or a tax collector.” (Mt 18:15-17).

The key word is “community/congregation”. In the original Greek version of the New Testament the word *ekklesia* is used here. It means a concrete assembly, a congregation, the Church. Assemblies play a crucial role in the Bible. The gathering of twelve very different peoples into one people is described in the Old Testament as a miracle of God, a new creation by God of something that is of equal importance as the creation of the world. It took a long struggle to unite Israel into one people and thus to make it a suitable instrument in the hand of God. It did not come about by a magical hand, but in countless assemblies of the people. Its most important and fundamental step was the gathering of the people at the Sinai. There they receive their basic law, the Torah, the commandments, a social order for living together. This becomes so important that the day when they agreed on the covenant will simply be called the “day of assembly”. Present are always “men and women and all who could understand it”—this becomes a unique characteristic of the biblical people. Like a refrain the biblical authors, when they tell their people of the assemblies of Israel, will repeat this essential characteristic.

### **A dining table as a place where God dwells**

In Judaism this takes place in the synagogues up to this day. Jesus also lived and learned there. But besides this official line with the services in the synagogue, there is a second track that takes place in the Jewish houses. They too are places of worship, of passing on the experiences of living according to God's commandments. This line also entered into Jesus' way of life, as we note when we are told that he celebrated Passover with just twelve people. Or when his words are handed down, “where two or three are gathered in my name...”

In the Jewish houses, father and mother are “priests,” not because they want to share the power of the clergy and finally possess a certain “office,” but because they are members of a “holy nation of priests” in which duty and promise lie on the shoulders of everyone. This becomes evident on the eve of the Sabbath. The tasks of various kinds are distributed between man and woman: lighting the candles, with the speaking of a prayer; blessing and distributing bread and wine. Their house, their apartment and the weekly celebration at the table convey God's presence, not only in prayer but also in eating, drinking and talking to each other. “Make me a home, and I will dwell among you.” (Exodus 25:8)

Such a place is much smaller, much more inconspicuous than something great and organized. It does not emit reform papers, manifestos and demands. Its medium is

not a pulpit, lectern or microphone, but a dining table. It is helpful that today there are social media, church service broadcasts, live streaming, Skype. Surely due to the plight of the epidemic, parishes are now making a huge leap into the digital world.

But there are also other ways of being together in real life for those who already live and work in a common household. A couple told me this week that last Sunday they read the texts of the service to each other—the prayers, the readings, the psalm, the gospel, the Our Father... That they had time to read and talk to each other with all the time of the world. A candle on the table and flowers gave a small festive touch to the whole. This is not the same as romantic togetherness. In the biblical texts they could, at the kitchen table, feel the great breath of the story of God. This is also something completely different from the cheap motto, “Now we can finally make Church ourselves,” or, “We don't actually need any priests and we don't need any Church.” The table of these two or three is in need of the large Church of the world. And the universal Church would remain a kind of pious UN, an abstract union, without such tables.

In a similar way the first Christians came together. The Emmaus story tells of just two disciples who sit at the table and realize who the other person is who is with them. On every Easter Monday this story is read to us. Perhaps this year we will hear it in a different way. Just two or three?! Yes, two, three...! Church buildings in today's sense of the word did not exist until after 200 AD. Until then, it was “Prisca and Aquila and the congregation gathered in their house” (Rom 16). A contemporary New Testament scholar called the house of this wealthy entrepreneurial couple “a mobile community centre.” They moved three times, transplanting their company for tarpaulins and tents in order to be able to offer Paul a home and a job. Paul also writes about a Mr. Gaius of Corinth who had taken him and the whole group into his house, and greets Mrs. Nympha in Laodicea and “the church in her house.” The exegete says of this form of praying and gathering also in the houses, that it was the building block for a “Church coming into existence house by house.”

Two or three “in his name” in a house, that is not the whole congregation and its Sunday assembly, but they are Church. They form a small community around the table, where the hunger to hear God's reasonable and comforting speech is truly satisfied—and in this way the desire to be together shoulder to shoulder again, remains vibrant among us.