

It's almost three months now since our last reception of the body and blood of Christ – or, at least, for most of us. The priests have continued to say Mass on behalf of everyone else and to offer and receive the eucharistic elements – the bread and wine become body and blood in the sacrifice of the Mass. So there's a sacrifice being made here by the priest, and a sacrifice by the people: the non-reception and celebration of the eucharist! This is an extraordinary situation. What is it telling us? One hesitates to begin, so fraught is our understanding of the eucharist, anyway, with theological difficulties, and with such a long history of these difficulties being used to define denominational divides, it raises the whole question of what is going on 'normally' let alone in these abnormal times. I have an article on the wall beside me with the title 'What *are* you doing up there?' from a Tablet article on 'Parish Practice' published in 2008, and the emphasis could go just about anywhere -try it! I keep it beside me to remind me that I am not here (or there), *as a priest*, for my own sake only. There's an added nuance to this – *as a priest* whose primary vocation is to be a monk – and what's *that* all about? One's head begins to spin. A comment by the papal preacher Raniero Cantalamessa might help:

Every Mass, even those celebrated these days privately or with a few people, is offered by the whole Church and for the whole Church. It is only in celebrating the Eucharist during the lockdown that I have fully understood this. At the moment when I pour the few drops of water into the wine glass, I think of the tears being shed, the sufferings of all humanity. (Tablet 30.5.20)

I'll need to raise my game a bit as, at the moment, when I celebrate Mass alone, in a room upstairs I can only think of you, this local congregation and people and the precious community of four who have stayed with us throughout, worshipping below in a separate room. And I see a series of faces and needs, as I do at every Mass in the chapel, who speak to me of the common need we all have of God, of the need, that is, to love and be loved. Is anything more needed? And I think of Christ on the cross gazing down at his people, all of them – those who are his immediate family and friends and those who have fled and those who have killed him. Ah, now I understand.

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