

Fr. Perozich comments —

I remember when I used to have the inspirations and thoughts just like those of Fr. Solomon. Since they come less frequently, I am pleased that others still have them to share with us, and that I can pass them along, highlighting what I found to be important before the rest of the article be read.

The background is the pandemic; the main plot is whither the Catholic church after the pandemic with the damage already done well before COVID=19.

- ***Catholic culture is something entirely unique—a singular set of truths that informs human action and creates the institutions of Catholic life.***
- ***God’s judgment is a mercy.***
- ***we belong to a Church not founded to move with the world, but rather founded to move the world***
- ***What we are indeed experiencing now is the death of a certain kind of Catholicism, what I will refer to as “small-c Catholicism,” which is a Catholicism that is both socially irrelevant and culturally impotent. I am talking about the death of a Catholicism that is not at the margins of society because it is counter-cultural, challenging, and scorned but one that has so blended into the mores of modern society that it is completely indistinguishable from them and thus absolutely superfluous to them.***
- ***The essence of Catholic life is the creation of Catholic culture. By Catholic culture I mean the ability to take the revealed and eternal truths of the Faith and refine them into a distinctive way of life.***
- ***Small-c Catholicism, the perishing kind, takes its eyes off the culture. It both fails to correct secular culture and to produce any culture of its own. It is both useless and sterile.***
- ***What we have lost is our way. And by this I mean three generations of Catholics.***
- ***The apostles, the people, and the rest of us have one thing in common: we all like the approval of the world. For the apostles, it meant glory. For the Jew, it meant relief from***

the dominion of Rome. And for the religious authorities, it meant Jesus their enemy had come to them. Palm Sunday teaches that when we look for approval from the world, we are destined never to be able to resist the world.

- ***Our present crisis is the first time in Christian history that a Christian people is not immediately seeking solace and comfort in Christianity.***
- ***Again, notwithstanding any good intentions, the outcome has been that we declared that the public worship of God is one of the first things we can do without.***
- ***If we are to convert, to cover ourselves with God's mercy, then we must accept a difficult truth: we cannot seek the approval of the world. The inability of Catholicism to resist the world means a world unable to resist evil. It is true that the Church may not have entirely capitulated, but it did not resist either.***
- ***Catholic practice for the last 50 years throughout the Western world has declined. We have seen in the last ten years an acceleration in that decline. As practice has fallen, the rise of the "nones"—those with no religion—has exploded.***
- ***If Catholic practice has been falling at an accelerating rate, then the decision to close the churches full stop has taken a trend and turned it into a conclusion.***
- ***A robust Catholic culture installs in the human heart those habits that bring forth virtue. The first of these virtues is to seek the truth, no matter what your preference is. No matter what the cost. The truth first. The truth last. The truth always.***
- ***After the death of the Lord, the apostles all found themselves locked in the upper room where they had three days prior celebrated the first Holy Mass.***
- ***In reality, they returned to the last place where they had been free. They returned to the place of their highest calling and their deepest virtue: they returned to the Mass.***

- *One of the greatest sorrows is that small-c Catholicism has abandoned a fundamental teaching of the Gospel, that we are free. The tendency of unfaithful men is to control. Control is the refuge of the pusillanimous.*
- *Every crisis catches you off guard. That is their nature. And we are going to make mistakes.*
- *A materialistic ecclesiology that seeks to put the right number of persons in the right number of places will never be an answer to a spiritual problem.*
- *Grace and virtue are the essence of Catholic family life.*

Where Do We Go From Here?

FR. MATTHEW SOLOMON



God's judgment is a mercy. This is not a popular idea. Firstly, this is because we do not like the idea of being judged. And secondly, we do not experience judgment in our lives as merciful. It is usually harsh and always unpleasant. God's judgment, however, is not an experience of this world. His judgement is a mercy, yet it is not an automatic mercy. It is not a free pass. In order for God's judgment to become a received mercy we must understand the purpose of why He judges the world. Especially now as the world looks for a way out of this current crisis, Catholics have a unique opportunity to contribute both reasons for hope in the future and a realistic explanation for what has just happened.

The responses of Catholics to the current pandemic have been many. They are largely of two kinds. The first boldly proclaims that the Church is at the start of something great. I acknowledge their optimism, but I do not share it. The second states that this will be the beginning of the end for the Church. I reject their pessimism, as I do not believe it. This is neither an end nor a beginning of the Church. Rather, this historical moment is the memorial of an ancient truth. It is not the first blow of some new church nor the final blow of some old one. Rather, it is the persistent tolling of the perennial Church. It is a reminder, if you will, that **we belong to a Church not founded to move *with* the world, but rather founded to move the world** (G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*).

What we are indeed experiencing now is the death of a certain kind of Catholicism, what I will refer to as "small-c Catholicism," which is a Catholicism that is both socially irrelevant and culturally impotent. I am talking about the death of a Catholicism that is not at the margins of society

because it is counter-cultural, challenging, and scorned but one that has so blended into the mores of modern society that it is completely indistinguishable from them and thus absolutely superfluous to them.

The world does not need or even respect a church whistling the tune of the zeitgeist and championing the latest fad. Polite society may nod approvingly at the earnest cleric performing a secular script for a worldly audience. The nod is a kind of wink—a one-eyed reference to an in-joke amongst the crowd. The cleric mistakes the nod for applause, when in reality he should recognize their scorn. Small-c Catholicism must perish.

The essence of Catholic life is the creation of Catholic culture. By Catholic culture I mean the ability to take the revealed and eternal truths of the Faith and refine them into a distinctive way of life.

Catholic culture is something entirely unique—a singular set of truths that informs human action and creates the institutions of Catholic life.

Human flesh reveals the nature of the human spirit. God-made-man reveals the essence of the divine. Catholic culture manifests what it means to live by revealed truth. When Augustine wrote his *Confessions* and Aquinas composed the *Pange Lingua* and Michelangelo sculpted the *Pieta*, they were not merely creating extraordinary works of literature, art, and poetry. They were revealing what a life inspired by truth and infused with grace must look like, and thereby teaching you and me how to live.

Small-c Catholicism, the perishing kind, takes its eyes off the culture. It both fails to correct secular culture and to produce any culture of its own. It is both useless and sterile. The secular world sees no value



in it, and Catholics can take no instruction from it. Small-c Catholicism for the past seventy-five years has been fighting an internecine battle for the control of a secular anthill. **What we have lost is our way. And by this I mean three generations of Catholics.**

So, how then does God's judgment draw us away from small-c Catholicism? The answer, as in all things, lies in the mysteries of Holy Week, which begins on Palm Sunday, instructs us in this conversion, and reveals how God's judgment has placed us under His mercy. The great story of the Passion, read on Palm Sunday, unfolds in three moments of intense drama. The first is a moment of triumph, one which is misunderstood. The second is a moment of betrayal: "a sword shall pierce your own heart, too" (Luke 2:35). The third is loss—the death of God-made-man. Each of these moments reveals what we need to do in order to change. It is in meditating upon each of these that we will discover how to live under God's mercy.

We begin with the triumph—a triumph no one in the Gospel story understands. As Christ enters the city of Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and is greeted by the rolling applause of the people, he simultaneously does two things. The first is that He fulfills Scripture, thus revealing Himself as the Messiah and thus the only Savior of the world. The second is that He reveals the folly and fickleness of the human condition. **The apostles, the people, and the rest of us have one thing in common: we all like the approval of the world. For the apostles, it meant glory. For the Jew, it meant relief from the dominion of Rome. And for the religious authorities, it meant Jesus their enemy had come to them. Palm Sunday teaches that when we look for *approval from the world*, we are destined never to be able to *resist the world*.**

Our present crisis is the first time in Christian history that a Christian people is not immediately seeking solace and comfort in Christianity. It is also the first time that Catholicism has barred us from seeking solace in its sacraments. As news broke of the virus, the public celebration of Holy Mass was suspended across the Catholic world. Now, as I have said, I am no medical expert. I do not know whether the cancellation of public Masses will have saved countless lives or none at all. I do have some doubts, and we may never really know. What I do know is that Catholic leadership provided no resistance. No protest. Even in the end, left with no other option but to cease the public offering of Holy Mass, we still had the choice to register our universal reluctance to do so. To resist in defense of the worship of God. The exact rules differed in different places. Regardless of the intention as to why, our leaders gave the

world the impression that they believed the public worship of God was non-essential. **Again, notwithstanding any good intentions, the outcome has been that we declared that the public worship of God is one of the first things we can do without.** The world approved as we suspended Mass, and then it went back to the gym, the shops, and the movies.

Christ's entry into Jerusalem could have been for Him a moment of worldly triumph. He could have been satisfied with the approval of the crowd and lived with it. Our Lord, however, refused. In that moment, He revealed that the essence of a Catholic life and a Catholic culture would be to resist the world—not to *condemn* the world, but rather to be *counter-cultural* to the world. **If we are to convert, to cover ourselves with God's mercy, then we must accept a difficult truth: we cannot seek the approval of the world. The inability of Catholicism to resist the world means a world unable to resist evil. It is true that the Church may not have entirely capitulated, but it did not resist either.** If we do not know where our North Star is, if we do not declare unequivocally the need to worship Almighty God above all else, and if we do not have the courage to declare right from wrong, then how can we expect the world to ever know?

The second thing that Christ does on His entry into Jerusalem involves a betrayal. It is hard to hear the story of Judas's betrayal. It is even harder to understand what made him do it, until we discover that the same temptation lurks deep in the heart of each of us. The essence of Judas's betrayal was a preference—the preference of self-care over self-sacrifice. When Christ's triumph looked like it was not going to be what Judas thought it should be, and when he could see

that Jesus was resisting the world, Judas preferred himself. The essence of betrayal is to prefer oneself. The human heart is always torn between following the truth and preferring itself. The heart is a natural idolater.

As churches were closed, there were many who rushed to comment on that decision. There were many who rushed to condemn the decision as they were absolutely certain that it was the wrong thing to do. There were others who praised the decision saying it was absolutely the right thing to do. As I have said, I am no expert and I do not know what the medically sound decision is. What I do know is that both those who praised and those who condemned are missing the point. **Catholic practice for the last 50 years throughout the Western world has declined. We have seen in the last ten years an acceleration in that decline. As practice has fallen, the rise of the “nones”—those with no religion—has exploded.** I am no expert in public health, but I do know something about Catholic practice. **If Catholic practice has been falling at an accelerating rate, then the decision to close the churches full stop has taken a trend and turned it into a conclusion.** Regardless of what the medically sound decision is, we are left with a pastoral reality bordering on the catastrophic.

There is much we do not know, but one thing is sure: we absolutely do not know how many people will come back to church when the churches are re-opened. As Catholics, we cannot shelter behind our own opinions and ignore the truth. Judas betrayed the truth because he preferred himself. An optimistic narrative is no answer to the enormity of the spiritual and pastoral challenge we are facing. If we ignore this pastoral reality, then we risk establishing a new normal of Christian practice, a new normal at its miserably lowest point.

If you thought that getting your children to church on Sunday was hard before, imagine it now. **A robust Catholic culture installs in the human heart those habits that bring forth virtue. The first of these virtues is to seek the truth, no matter what your preference is. No matter what the cost. The truth first. The truth last. The truth always.**

And, finally, we have the loss. We can only imagine what it must have been like to have witnessed the death of the Lord. Some of the apostles probably followed Him, and some of the apostles probably watched Him, but only one stood by Him. It is easy to be critical. In a time of crisis, you always fall back to your highest level of freedom, which is your greatest level of virtue. Doctors know that in the heat of an emergency they do not magically gain some new medical knowledge or competence. That is why you must ensure that your training is up to date. Catholicism teaches something similar.

After the death of the Lord, the apostles all found themselves locked in the upper room where they had three days prior celebrated the first Holy Mass. Perhaps they were trying to recall their last happy moment, perhaps they were relying on a place they thought was secure, or perhaps they ended up there without thinking of anything at all. **In reality, they returned to the last place where they had been free. They returned to the place of their highest calling and their deepest virtue: they returned to the Mass.** Without their fully understanding why at that moment, this room was for them a place of freedom. In this place, Christ had foretold not only what would become of them, but He had set them free truly to become their deepest selves. Their returning to the upper room was an instinct, a Catholic instinct. On Good Friday

afternoon, the apostles could not yet see it clearly, but Christ had set them free. You cannot blame the apostles for not having had a plan to live by according to the resurrection of Jesus. It was not yet Easter Sunday. The same cannot be said of us.

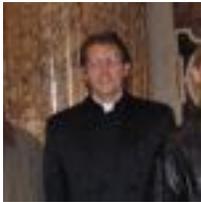
The last twenty years of Catholicism have largely been a crisis. Our attempts to address this crisis have been legal, strategic, revolutionary, and expensive, but they have not been Catholic. **One of the greatest sorrows is that small-c Catholicism has abandoned a fundamental teaching of the Gospel, that we are free. The tendency of unfaithful men is to control. Control is the refuge of the pusillanimous.** It looks good on paper, but in reality it is a thing of weakness. It impresses the worldly that we are taking things seriously, yet it is “things” that we take seriously; it is eternity we take for granted. Whatever is lacking in the hearts of church men and women cannot be programmed. It cannot be planned. **Every crisis catches you off guard. That is their nature. And we are going to make mistakes.** Allowances need to be made for those mistakes. Unprecedented conditions will always lead to unpredictable consequences. **A materialistic ecclesiology that seeks to put the right number of persons in the right number of places will never be an answer to a spiritual problem.** Our time, like all times, is a time of saints. Let our parishes, chaplaincies, and missions be renewed as schools of supernatural virtue and temples of sacramental grace. **Grace and virtue are the essence of Catholic family life.**

Every Easter Season begins with the loss of God—the death of Christ. And perhaps you have lost Him in many ways this Easter: no Mass, no open churches, and no liturgies. The

stone of the tomb has been rolled across our Catholic lives and the light of the Savior is extinguished in our Catholic prayers. The sun that warms us has vanished. The air we breathe is exhausted. Although we feel the loss of Christ, He is never far from us. I end with a final quote, one that can be for us not the start of a prayer, but a conversion that places us under the mercy of Almighty God:

He who learns must suffer.
And even in our sleep pain,
which cannot forget,
falls drop by drop upon the heart,
until, in our own despair, against our will,
comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.

Photo credit: AFP via Getty Images



By [Fr. Matthew Solomon](#)

Fr. Matthew Solomon writes from his parish in Sydney, Australia.