

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and Friends,

This weekend, even though there are still many live-streamed Masses out there for those of you who like surfing until you find a church, liturgical style and setting you have got used to regardless of where in the world the Mass is being celebrated, Mass is again being celebrated *hic et nunc* in the familiar surroundings of our own parish church. Having been deprived of physical attendance at Mass in real time for in excess of four months, many will have forgotten what it *felt like* to be assisting at Mass with the other members of our parish family. The first focus at Sunday Mass must be the scripture readings, the homily and the liturgy of the Eucharist, not least our personal reception of Holy Communion. The second focus, understandably enough, may be the new “normal”: being ushered to our designated seat by a steward, signing the attendance sheet [in case we might have to launch a *track and trace* operation], paying attention to the one-way system we have been obliged to install and the rather peculiar way in which Holy Communion is distributed. Our third focus will be the gathered community, the congregation. We may be curious as to who exactly is hiding behind that mask and it is natural to register a slight frustration that we cannot discern whether our fellow worshipper is smiling or not.

It is inevitable that during Mass we will have mixed feelings: apprehension, delight at being back, joy at joining in communal prayer, and curiosity as to how other people will observe the Covid - 19 protocols that are likely to be with us for some time. We may wonder how we can make this first time back at Sunday Mass a positive experience. Is there any way it can boost our spiritual lives? Does the experience of being back tell us something about what we have missed during the four-month lock-down? We have heard a lot of people say or write [in among other worthy journals The TABLET] that they have rediscovered their *private* relationship with Jesus or with God. There is a distinct possibility that such people will vote with their feet and not come back to church and to communal worship immediately. Those of us who do, however, realise to start with that there is no *private* relationship with the Lord for a Christian, brotherhood/sisterhood are at the very heart of our Christian identity.

During lockdown the endless acts of kindness, the phone calls to those who live alone, the errands run for self-isolating neighbours all bear eloquent witness to that sense of a communal relationship with the Lord. We are sisters and brothers in Christ. Even if for the moment our liturgies are rather spartan, celebrated with despatch and without music or singing, they only come alive when we are worshipping together. Perhaps as we unpick our experience of being at home during lockdown and keeping the home fires of our faith gently burning, and as we reflect on how we feel to be back in church, attending Mass with other members of the community, we might thereby deepen our understanding of what it is to pray, sing, worship together with one mind and one heart.

Father Patrick