

## DEFENDING THE UNPOPULAR

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At the heart of Christianity is the notion of forgiveness, both the seeking and the granting of it. No one is worthy of this forgiveness, but if sought, it must be given. Over the last few decades, the Catholic Church has apologized for a number of sins, both real and perceived. Obviously the issue of sexual abuse is the most contemporary and the most egregious, but Pope John Paul II was famous for multiple apologies for the alleged wrongs the Church had committed over the centuries, including the sack of Constantinople, which the Greek Orthodox Church had been demanding for a thousand years. When he actually said sorry during his visit to Greece in 2001, the Orthodox were rather unsure what to do, and wondered whether they might now be able to say the Lord's Prayer with the Pope of Rome: they decided it might just be acceptable.

As the world emerges from the pandemic, an honest and humble assessment from within the institutional Church needs to be made about the Church's response to the virus in every country, because the response varied. But it is fair to say that, in Britain and the United States, at least during the first lockdown, fear and overreaction was the norm. Here I am particularly referring to the Catholic Church; there are others, for example, who have questioned and criticized the actions and attitude of the established Church in England, including the mealy-mouthed, "don't blame me, I'm not the Pope," from Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury a few weeks ago.

At the start of the pandemic, although not barring its clergy from entering their parish churches, it is reported that the Catholic hierarchy in England petitioned the Government to close the churches before that had been suggested. Although it might be fading in some peoples memories, I will never forget walking past the imposing structure of a large Cathedral on a weekday lunchtime, a moment when the building would usually be filled

with people coming and going for daily Mass and confessions, and seeing the doors bolted shut. There was something profoundly wrong about that picture. It was the same for ordinary parishioners up and down the country. Parish clergy were bombarded with directives, not about helping people struggling with their faith, but about cleaning and wiping pews, and other health and safety measures: the new Gospel of cleanliness leading to godliness.

In the United States, some bishops told their clergy not to visit the sick, hear confessions or even go to hospitals to give the Last Rites. One particularly inept and oafish prelate launched his multi-million dollar fundraising campaign in the same week he banned his priests from sick visits and ordered the church doors locked.

At the very moment when the Christian Gospel, with its life-giving and hopeful message of the triumph of life over death, and of light defeating darkness, so desperately needed to be heard, there seemed to be silence from those charged with preaching that Good News. It was left to secular commentators, including Simon Heffer and Douglas Murray, to do the Church's work for it, and question why that voice was so silent.

After the first lockdown, at least in England, as the Church continued to be excessively cautious, stories emerged of desperate people who had called for the Last Rites to be administered only to be ignored, and, in one instance, of a priest who spent most of lockdown in his bedroom watching daytime television.

Still, two years later, places remain where fear reigns, masks are almost de rigeur, and, according to anecdotal evidence gathered from speaking with clergy, the number of 'returnees' varies widely. Some parishes report a very poor return of thirty or forty percent of pre-lockdown numbers, in other places, where the priests made great efforts to do all they could for their people, numbers are at a more healthy seventy or eighty percent.

The massive financial crisis this will cause the Church is only just being realized, and the

closure and merging of parishes, which was already happening before the pandemic, will increase rapidly. One senior priest told me that it will not be until next year that the full effects of lockdown on the Church will be seen, when the finances and lack of numbers really hits home. Worryingly again, clergy talk suggests that it's particularly young families who have not come back—perhaps they just lost the habit.

The Church, at an institutional level, failed in its mission both to preach the Gospel and to bring the healing power of the sacraments to those who believed and who needed them most. What are often called 'good Catholics,'—those who come to Mass and have returned to Church after the pandemic—are angry, and those in authority do not seem to realize how they have let these people down. There needs to be a public acknowledgment of that fact and, in a spirit of humility, a request for forgiveness. After every failure, and every interminable and expensive enquiry, the same mantra of 'lessons learned' is repeated. Will the lessons of this woeful, inadequate, and shameful reaction of the Church during the pandemic be heard the next time the country faces a crisis?

There is one action the Church should take right now, despite its unpopularity with some, that might show that the institution has not forgotten its prophetic role to defend the downtrodden and the marginalized in society. That would be to speak up for, and defend, those who are threatened with the loss of their livelihoods for their conscientious objection to vaccine mandates. Despite the apparent walking back by Sajid Javid, the British Health Secretary, of the NHS staff mandate, this issue has not disappeared. It would have nothing to do with being 'anti-vax,' and the Church could be very clear about that, but rather about civil liberties in the face of the inordinate exercise of political power, and the rights of the worker. Unlike during the two years of pandemic fear and timidity, this would be a counter-cultural moment for the Church, not to be popular, but to be right—and would mark a start in atoning for the recent failures of its hierarchy.