

The churches remain empty in the Corona crisis. Is that a sign from God? An essay by the Czech philosopher Tomáš Halík

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Church: The church is facing dark times. It must therefore take off old clothes and reinvent itself.

On the way down

Our world is sick. I don't just mean the pandemic of the Corona virus, but also the state of our civilization. The global phenomenon of the corona pandemic makes this clear. It is, biblically speaking, a sign of the times.

At the beginning of this unusual Lent, many of us thought that although this epidemic caused a short-term blackout, a disruption to the normal course of society, we would somehow survive everything and could soon return to the old mode. But it won't happen that way. And it would be bad if we tried to do it. After this global experience, the world will no longer be the same - and obviously it should not be the same.

It is natural that, in times of disaster, we are initially interested in the material things necessary for survival. But it still applies: "People do not live on bread alone." It is now time to take a closer look at the deeper connections of this shock to the security of our world. The inevitable process of globalization has apparently reached its peak: Now the global vulnerability of the globalized world is showing.

What challenge does this situation pose for Christianity, for the Church - one of the first "global players" - and for theology?

The church should be what Pope Francis wants it to be: "a field hospital". With this metaphor, the Pope means that the Church should not separate from the world in the comfortable "Splendid Isolation", but should go beyond its borders and help those who are physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually wounded. As a result, she can also repent for the fact that her representatives have until recently allowed people to be injured, even the most defenseless. However, let's try to think this metaphor further - and to confront it even more deeply with life.

If the church is supposed to be a "hospital", it should definitely offer health, social and charitable services, as it has done since the beginning of its history. However, like a good hospital, the church should also perform other tasks: diagnosis ("recognizing the signs of the times"), prevention (societies in which the malicious viruses of fear, hatred, populism and nationalism spread, to immunize) and convalescence (by forgiving to resolve the trauma of the past).

Last year, Paris' Notre-Dame cathedral burned down before Easter. During Lent this year, no services are held in hundreds of thousands of churches on many continents - and also in synagogues and mosques. As a priest and theologian, I think about the empty and closed churches. I see it as a sign of God and as a call.

Understanding the language of God in the events of our world requires the art of mental distinction, and this requires a contemplative distance from our aroused emotions and prejudices, to the projections of our fears and desires. In moments of catastrophe, the "sleeping agents of an evil, vengeful God" come to life; they spread fear and try to extract religious capital for themselves from the situation. Your vision of God has been watering the mills of atheism for centuries.

In times of disaster, I am not looking for a god who has set himself behind the stage of our world like an angry director, but I perceive him as a source of strength that works in those who show solidarity and sacrificial love in such situations - yes, even in those who have no "religious motivation". God is a humble and discreet love.

However, I can't get rid of the question of whether the time of empty and closed churches does not give the church a warning view through the telescope into a relatively near future: This could be how it will look in a large part of our world in a few years. Aren't we warned enough by developments in many countries where the churches, monasteries and seminaries continue to empty and close? Why have we held external influences ("the tsunami of secularism") responsible for this development for so long and did not want to acknowledge that another chapter in the history of Christianity is coming to an end and it is therefore necessary to prepare for the next one?

Perhaps this period of empty churches symbolically shows the churches their hidden emptiness and a possible future that could occur if the churches did not seriously try to present a completely different form of Christianity to the world. We were too concerned that the "world" (the others) would have to turn around than we would have thought of our own "turnaround" - not just an "improvement" but the shift from static "Christianity" to dynamic "Become a Christian".

Why didn't we want to acknowledge that another chapter in the history of Christianity is coming to an end?

In the Middle Ages, when the church imposed excessive punishment for the interdict and as a result of this "general strike" of the entire ecclesiastical apparatus there were no services in many regions and no sacraments were donated, people began to have a personal relationship with God, the "naked faith", to look for - lay brotherhoods and mysticism experienced a great boom. This upsurge in mysticism certainly contributed to the emergence of the Reformations, that of both Luther and Calvin, as well as the Catholic Reformation, which was associated with the Jesuits and Spanish mysticism. Perhaps even today the rediscovery of contemplation could complement the "synodal paths" to a new reform council.

Where is today's Galilee?

Perhaps we should accept the current fasting from the services and from the church as a *kairos*, as a time of opportunity to pause and think carefully before and with God. I am convinced that the time has come to think about how to proceed along the path of reform, of which Pope Francis speaks of the need: neither attempts to return to a world that no longer exists, nor to rely on oneself to mere external reforms of structures, but a turn towards the core of the gospel, a "way into the depth".

I don't see a happy solution in the fact that during the ban on public services we use artificial substitutes in the form of television broadcasts of holy masses too quickly. A turn to "virtual piety", to "eating from afar" and kneeling in front of the screen is indeed a strange thing. Perhaps we should rather experience the truth of the word of Jesus: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them."

We should certainly take the impulses of the Amazon Synod seriously, but at the same time create a larger space for the service of the laity in the church; let's not forget that in many areas the Church survived centuries without priests.

Perhaps this "state of emergency" is only an indication of a new form of the Church, of which there have already been precedents in history. I am convinced that our Christian communities, parishes, colleges, ecclesiastical movements and religious communities should approach the ideal from which European universities emerged: to be a community of students and teachers, a school of wisdom in which the truth free disputation and deep contemplation. Such islands of spirituality and dialogue can give rise to a recovering force for the sick world.

Cardinal Bergoglio quoted a statement from the Apocalypse the day before his election to the Pope: Christ stands at the door and knocks on the door. He added: Today, however, Christ knocks on the inside of the church and wants to go out. Maybe he just did that.

Perhaps this period of empty churches symbolically shows the churches their hidden emptiness. For many years I have been thinking about the well-known text by Friedrich Nietzsche about the "great man" (a fool, the only one who is allowed to tell the truth) who announces the "death of God". The chapter ends with that "great man" going to the churches to initiate the "Requiem aeternam Deo" and asked: "What are these churches if they are not the tombs and tombs of

God?" I admit that various forms of the church have long reminded me of cool and magnificent tombs of a dead god.

This Easter, many of our churches are likely to be empty. In some other place, we will recite the gospel of the empty tomb. If the emptiness of the church reminds us of an empty grave, we should not miss the voice from above: "He is not here. He has risen. He precedes you to Galilee."

The suggestion for meditation for this strange Easter is: where is this Galilee from today, where can we meet the living Christ?

Sociological studies tell us that in our world the "home" are becoming fewer (both those who fully identify with a traditional form of religion and those who follow dogmatic atheism) and the "seekers" are becoming more. Beyond that, however, the number of "apatheists" - people who leave both religious questions and traditional answers indifferent.

The main line of division no longer runs between those who think they are believers and those who think they are unbelievers. There are "seekers" both among the believers (those for whom belief is not an "inherited property" but rather "a way") and among the "unbelievers" who reject religious beliefs that surround them who nevertheless feel the longing for a source that could quench their thirst for meaning.

I am convinced that this "Galilee of today", where to go to seek the God who went through death, is the world of seekers.

Lent of empty and silent churches

Liberation theology taught us to seek Christ among people on the margins of society; however, it is necessary to seek it among people who are marginalized in the Church; for those who "don't go with us". If we want to enter there as disciples of Jesus, we have to do many things first.

We have to give up our previous ideas about Christ. The Risen One is radically changed by the experience of death. As we read in the Gospels, not even his loved ones could recognize him. We do not have to believe everything that is reported to us. We can insist that we want to touch his wounds. By the way, where do we meet him today with greater certainty, if not exactly in the wounds of the world and in the wounds of the church, in the wounds of the body that he took on?

We have to give up our proselytic intentions. We must therefore not enter the world of seekers in order to "convert" them as quickly as possible and to narrow them down into the existing institutional and mental limits of our churches. Even Jesus, who was looking for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel", did not lead them into the existing structures of the then Jewish religion. He knew that new wine had to be poured into new bottles.

We want to extract both new and old things from the treasure of tradition that has been entrusted to us, in order to make them part of the dialogue with the seekers; a dialogue in which we can and should learn from each other. We should learn to radically expand the limits of our understanding of the Church. It is no longer enough that we open the "forecourt for the Gentiles" generously in the temple of the church. The Lord has already knocked "from the inside" and he has already left - and it is our job to find him and to follow him. Christ went through the door that we had closed for fear of the others, he went through the wall behind which we hid, opened a room for us, the width and depth of which made us dizzy.

Right at the beginning of its history, the young church of Jews and Gentiles experienced the destruction of the temple in which Jesus prayed and taught his disciples. The then Jews found a brave and creative answer: the altar of the destroyed temple was replaced by the table of the Jewish family, the sacrificial provisions were replaced by the provisions for private or common prayer, the burnt victims and the bloody victims were replaced by the victims of the lips, of thought and heart, prayer and study of scripture. Around the same time, young Christianity, which was driven out of the synagogues, was looking for its new identity. Jews and Christians learned to read and interpret the law and the prophets on the ruins of the traditions. Are we not in a similar situation today?

When Rome fell on the threshold of the fifth century, many had a quick explanation ready: for the Gentiles, the fall of Rome was the punishment of the gods for the acceptance of Christianity, and for the Christians his fall was the punishment of God for a Rome that still hadn't stopped being the whore of Babylon. St. Augustine rejected both interpretations: in this period of change he developed his theology of the eternal struggle of the two "realms" (*civitates*): not the Christians and the Gentiles, but the two "loved ones" who live in the human heart: self-love, who remains closed to transcendence (*amor sui usque ad contemptum Dei*) and love that surrenders and thereby finds God (*amor Dei usque ad contemptum sui*). Doesn't this time of civilization change call for a new theology of current history and a new understanding of the Church?

Let us take the coming Easter time as a call to a new search for Christ. Let us not seek the living among the dead.

"We know where the church is, but we do not know where it is not," taught Orthodox theologian Evdokimov. Perhaps the words about catholicity and ecumenism, which were pronounced by the last council, should have a new and deeper content: The time has come for a broader and deeper ecumenism, for a more courageous "search for God in all things".

We can only accept this fasting period of empty and silent churches as a short provisional provision, which we will soon forget. However, we can also accept it as *kairos* - as a time of opportunity "to descend" and to seek a new identity for Christianity in a world that is radically changing before our eyes. The current pandemic is certainly not the only global threat that our world is facing and will face.

Let us take the coming Easter time as a call to a new search for Christ. Let us not seek the living among the dead. Let us look for him courageously and persistently and let us not be confused by the fact that he may seem like a stranger to us. We will recognize him by his wounds, by his voice when he speaks to us familiarly, by his spirit, which brings peace and dispels fear.

Translated from Czech by Markéta Barth, Radolfzell.