

## Rediscovering sacred spaces in a pandemic



The faithful found themselves using their laptops to celebrate the end of Lent and the start of Ramadan, others missing services for the first time in decades. I stayed home on Sundays, pacing my neighbourhood until I found a path that led to the harbour.

'My own community has been meeting mostly online for the whole year,' she said, 'Christianity is all about relationship, so consummating those relationships in what's appropriate to the circumstance to stay safe and healthy... most of the places where Jesus taught was out in the middle of nature... in the midst of life with people.'

When the rituals and ceremonies of faith require the meeting of people and the presence of a priest, however, staying apart is far more difficult.

Bishop Richard Umbers of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney has been leading his parish in sacred traditions, or sacraments, including the Eucharist, taking of wine and bread, believed to be the literal body and blood of Jesus Christ through the miracle of transubstantiation, virtually.

'The Being, the flesh, is really important. That's where the sacraments come in because it makes Jesus present to us in a very physical way, it's a spiritual grace brought about through physical signs that you can see and touch,' he said, 'the Pope can't perform the miracle of transubstantiation over TV... That's what makes this so painful, being separated from the sacraments.'

'There's a long tradition in the Church ... of people who have been deprived of the sacraments for years,' said Bishop Umbers, 'when you look at Japan and the hidden Christians, that was three centuries without the sacraments!' He goes on, 'the thing is, we are bound by the sacraments, but God is not. The Holy Spirit is never lacking.'

I continue to swim, even as the water temperature makes my skin turn pink and purple in the cold, shirking public transport for a nearly twenty-kilometre bicycle loop.

Bishop Umbers and his colleagues continue to encourage parishioners to meet together and take part in the sacraments, mitigating risk where they can.

We take risks to rediscover what is sacred and hold fast to it. We catch up over drinks to share the week's burdens, wear masks in a house of worship, read holy texts over Zoom, or take bread and wine with freshly washed hands.

What we lose when buildings and beaches close forces us to rediscover the heart of what is sacred and how we connect to the divine. Whatever form it takes, our experience of the sacred has been made more personal and more urgently desired. Perhaps, we are better for it.

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