

Our dinner tables: the Christian new normal

Rediscovering the truly sacred spaces in the great Christian act of praise and thanksgiving



In the world's wealthier countries the virus is retreating before the vaccines. Deo gratias! In some places, parish life and celebrations in church buildings are returning to a kind of normality. Many Catholics, especially presbyters, are pleased: the familiar is returning. But before we settle back into our familiar ways, we should take stock. A new normal might be much more in keeping with the gospel than the old and familiar.

The God of all

For Christians the whole of the cosmos – every last bit of it from the sun, moon and stars to the stones one stubs one's toe on – was the handiwork of God. God had created it in freedom and God was infinitely more than the

creation. The shock of this was captured in the mid-second century by Hermes in a little amusing tag that would pull up any pagan short: the Christians believed that "God created everything out of nothing" (creatio ex nihilo). All depends on God's will and love. All is ordinary in comparison with God. Only God is Holy. Put another way, the whole creation is a sacred space because it is God's handiwork

.... **and climate change?** That is why, for example, when Pope Francis talks about the ecological crisis he is engaging in a religious topic. This may cause great annoyance of the climate change deniers who do not see this as any of his business. But it is his business, and the business of everyone (Jew, Christian and Muslim) who proclaims that God is not one more being in the universe, but the ineffable cause of all being

.... **and liturgy?** This also means that wherever I am I can be as close to God as anywhere else. The creation is our temple. This was expressed by John thus: Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (Jn 4, 21-4). Wherever a human being is, there God is present and there that person can be present to God. The divine love extends to each person, so each person is able, and has the dignity, to stand there in God's presence and offer worship.

Hence, we stand when, through Jesus the Christ, we all intercede for the world in the Prayer of the Faithful. We can all, not just a specially selected few, enter the divine presence. This is what saying "we are a priestly people" means. It is also the reason why the early Christians never referred to their leaders as sacerdotēs (priests) but as presbuterōi (elders). By the time Christians started to use the word sacerdotēs for presiders at the Eucharist, they were already thinking in the pagan way of a "chosen someone" who worked on their behalf in the "sacred area".

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