

Lockdowns from Lauriston - Fr Damian Howard on the post-Covid Church

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In the last of the Lockdowns from Lauriston talks, Fr Damian Howard SJ looks back on some of the key learning from the series and ahead to the challenges and opportunities for the Church in the ‘new normal’. As the Ignatian month of July invites us to celebrate the life and legacy of the founder of the Society of Jesus, it is important to remember that along with the tragedies, good things have also come out of the lockdown.

Watch the talk here: Video of The Church After Lockdown | Fr Damian Howard SJ

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The power of interruption changes lives dramatically. An example is the story of the conversion of St Ignatius, the fifth centenary of which is next year. Ignatius had been a soldier and had led a fairly unedifying life. And then calamity struck in battle when a French cannon ball smashed his leg to bits at Pamplona, forcing him to undergo painful surgery and a prolonged period of convalescence. It was by interrupting his life that God got to work on his imagination, so that a new and much better Ignatius emerged from his enforced sabbatical, setting him off on his long journey towards sainthood.

The Grace of being interrupted

I remember talking to a man suffering from AIDS, way back in the 1990s. He told me about his life, which had involved a fair number of low-quality relationships, and then came out with a statement that took my breath away: “Becoming HIV+ was the best thing that ever happened to me.” It really shocked me that someone could say anything that big. I couldn’t imagine being able to say such a thing. But his life had been transformed for the better by a lethal virus. By being interrupted, he had discovered God as real and God as mercy. And that led to a new honesty, a new integrity and new possibilities for good relationship.

Covid isn’t quite the same as HIV. HIV only interrupted the lives of certain groups of people – and it took years to do it. Covid has interrupted the life of the entire planet – and with astonishing speed. Does that interruption bring with it salvific possibilities? There is plenty of evidence to suggest it does:

It has interrupted our dysfunctional lifestyles, showing us that we don’t need to consume as much, to travel to work every day, to practice exploitative tourism, or to fry the planet with our compulsive use of fossil fuels and aeroplanes.

I have discovered that that quite a few young people have been pleasantly surprised by the interruption of an exploitative dating scene. There has been a lot more practical chastity among a population for whom sex has become casual and banal – and a lot less manipulation and exploitation.

It has helped people with addiction, especially among the homeless, to break their habit.

It has opened up the domestic space as a possible place for encounter with the sacred.

Surprisingly, the suicide rate in Germany and Japan has fallen dramatically. It will be interesting to see what the pattern is in other countries.

We knew that there was an alternative to the way we live our lives. But how were we supposed to break out of destructive habits? And how could break out together? We had to be interrupted. And now we know we really can live slower lives, closer to our families, our communities, to nature, and to God.

Seeing what dwells in the shadows

There is another, more costly type of grace that comes with interruption: it forces us to look at things we would often rather not look at, to allow our gaze to linger on what lurks in the shadows. I like the phrase: ‘what the eyes does not see, the heart cannot grieve over’. There is so much we do not see. There is so much we do not even want to see... Covid has given us a little push.

Inequality: Probably the starker shadow that has been cast is that of inequality. In lockdown it makes quite a difference if you have a large house and a garden. If you have decent food and a pharmacy close by. If you are part of a strong community where people take care of each other. How on earth do you home-school your children if they can't access a computer or decent Wi-Fi? Or if you yourself cannot read – or speak English?

Race: In the middle of a pandemic, attention suddenly turned to slavery and its legacy in America and Britain, an issue which most of us probably assumed had been dealt with long ago. Race became an issue with the death of George Floyd and the realisation that ethnic minorities were more vulnerable to Covid-19 than the white population. But there's a third factor too: the advance over the last decade of the far right, which has had a toxic effect on many minority groups. Whatever you think about the politics of statues, the eruption of protest was an expression of something that can no longer be ignored. An awful lot of people are hurting because of the message they have been given about not belonging.

Older people: A notable shadow has been the plight of our elderly population, especially those in care homes. Our treatment of the elderly is a long-standing scandal. We all know that caring for grandparents with dementia takes a huge amount of time and energy and in a frenetic, hyper-active society like ours, it's a burden too far for most working people. So, we consign our loved ones to care homes. Covid brought them back to a kind of visibility because the death- rate in homes was sky-high. But who is going to keep them in the limelight? And how are we to care for them decently?

Migrants: There are other dark corners that we are even less keen to look into. We have heard about destitute asylum seekers. I'd like to hear more, too, about how poor migrant workers have fared, people who live in the outskirts of our cities in crowded accommodation and are paid a pittance. I'd like to know more about the plight of trafficked people. The outbreaks of Covid infections in meat factories and abattoirs ought to draw our attention to places we don't even want to think about, where poor labourers undertake work which would make our stomachs churn, and in conditions that match a mechanised hell. All these groups have been totally absent from media coverage – and that is hardly surprising.

A Church that takes time, is local, and discerns how to reach out

Where does all this leave the Church? I would highlight three new opportunities:

Helping people slow down, to become more contemplative, to become once again capable of appreciating symbols, which is an essential pre-condition for living a sacramental life.

Welcoming people into a life that is more local, more connected with family and with the earth - and, paradoxically, more connected with people in other parts of our interconnected globe. A new localism would be wonderful news for parishes.

Venturing out into some of those dark corners of our society. That will be challenging. It will require courage and, more importantly, communities of discernment who hear God's call to go out, to take a risk.

The Metaphors of Safety: Masks and Distances

Masks: It has been fascinating to watch the progress of the mask in Britain. It has been so complicated! Masks were adopted unproblematically in the countries of East Asia – China, South Korea, Japan, where they seem to have been part of a dazzlingly successful strategy for defeating the virus. In the UK we have agonised over masks. We didn't want to wear them. The scientists created a fantastic mystique about how complicated they were to use, and even talked about the risks of them giving us a false sense of security. Yet now we are all asked to wear them in certain places – which we generally don't.

Perhaps it's my interest in Islam that makes me see all of this linked to those other neuralgic examples of facial covering, the niqab and the burka. There is a visceral resistance to the covering of the face, that part of the body which most betokens identity and individuality. We live in a culture that values each person's individuality.

I do wonder what our resistance is all about. You may say that it's because it's uncomfortable or because the government's advice was confused – which it was. But why was that the case here and not everywhere?

Distance: The second metaphor we have invoked is that of social distancing. On the whole my sense is that people have been admirable in their self-discipline, particularly in denying themselves visits to relatives and friends. Distancing has been nothing like as fraught a business as masking. When you think about the astronomical economic cost of distancing in all its various manifestations, you'd have to put our embrace of it down to something a great deal stronger than personal preference. So, what explains it?

Being a modern human: I think what is at stake in both metaphors is a deep unspoken sense of what it means to be a modern human being. We are individuals. We are self-expressive, we are autonomous. And we are also bounded – we keep our distance.

We have become more and more individual consumers defined by our “likes”, detached from all the ties that used to bind us. Never before have we been so atomised, so distanced. And frankly we have learned to like that. I think that is why distancing has been so easy for us, while wearing masks has been profoundly problematic. Faced with the choice of being close to others but having to hide my individuality or being able to express my identity in splendid isolation, your average Brit plumps without much hesitation for the latter.

The Church of the Incarnate Word

What does this mean for the Church? A great deal. We are the Church of the incarnation and that doctrine steers us very obviously away from making a fetish of distance. Christ comes close: we are invited into nothing less than communion with the Father in Him. We are so intimately close to God and to one another that we can only express that truth by consuming Christ's body and drinking His blood. The physicality of our communion is something Catholics in particular have long emphasised against a piety which conceptualises and “symbolises”. You can't be a Catholic Christian and stay away from other people.

Pope Francis often stresses how importance it is to touch the hands of the poor and has a deeply spiritual sense of God's touch with us. But it's not as though the Gospel is just a wonderful proclamation of our closeness to God and to one another. The incarnation required an awful lot of preparation and even more efforts at understanding! Getting close to others is hard. The Gospel shows us what it takes for individuals to move out of their isolation and alienation and to become close. Entering lockdown was easy. Coming out of it again is tricky. Theo Hawksley nailed it in an earlier talk in this 'Lockdown from Lauriston' series when she pointed out that the fact that everything is interconnected is not an uncomplicatedly good thing. In fact, it is incredibly hard to handle. Maybe that's why modern people like the relative simplicity of keeping their distance. Catholics have a way of understanding how to build communion and it is centred on Jesus, the path of mercy, the mystery of the incarnation. Maybe that is a way we need to talk about the Gospel in the coming years.

The Challenge of Evangelisation: The collapse of the sources of modern hope

People need some kind of hope to propel them forward in their lives. But where they place it is decisive. There have been three sources of hope which have guided human societies since the Enlightenment. All have acquired a quasi-mythological status. There is the idea of progress, that things are always getting better; that science will always save us; that personal freedom is the ultimate value.

Progress: We obviously no longer believe, as we did until comparatively recently, that 'every day, in every way, things get better and better'. In fact, many young people now see tomorrow as a time of ecological apocalypse. The implications of the death of belief in progress for our civilisation still have to be reckoned with.

Science: We depend on science to an extraordinary extent, but its limits have become clear for all to see in the last few months. That phrase beloved of certain politicians, 'we are only following the science' suggests that scientists have all the answers to all the questions. Well they don't and they never did. Honest scientists have always stressed that too. Scientific experts have a tremendous contribution to make to public policy, but they are not the only voices that count. Science alone cannot save us from the challenges we are facing currently. We also need other bodies of knowledge and expertise, among which, let's not forget, are ethics and religion, voices our society has not been keen to listen to for decades.

Freedom: That value for which millions died in the last century. It would feel almost blasphemous to say that it's not as uniquely important as we thought. Yet, safety and security, self-restraint and self-sacrifice have also turned out to be of huge value to us, and when we see behaviour that vaunts personal liberty but is oblivious to these things it offends us. The Church has long been saying that western liberal societies have an impoverished understanding of freedom and I think that truth has never been plainer than it is now. Freedom, for instance, means being free to serve the common good, to commit myself more deeply to the community.

Pope Benedict's Spe Salvi

So here is the problem: if those three pillars of modern hope are weakening, perhaps even crumbling, where are people to turn? It's a very practical question. What sort of hope can there be when it's not all about tomorrow being better, healthier, freer and more prosperous than today? It's easy to see all sorts of worrying hopes that people are reaching for. Is there a better way?

Back in 2007 Pope Benedict XVI wrote a whole encyclical letter, *Spe Salvi*, devoted to that question. It is a text for our times and I offer you this quotation as a taster:

Jesus was not Spartacus, he was not engaged in a fight for political liberation like Barabbas or Bar-Kochba. Jesus, who himself died on the Cross, brought something totally different: an encounter with the Lord of all lords, an encounter with the living God and thus an encounter with a hope stronger than the sufferings of slavery, a hope which therefore transformed life and the world from within. (SS, 4)

That is the hope of the Church: the encounter with a personal God comes first, leading to a "transformation of life and the world from within". But the fruit of this encounter is entry into the life of Jesus Christ, which is a life lived for and with others, as well as a life anticipated in here and now, albeit imperfectly. And that's hope: an anticipation of the completeness we will only know in its fulness eschatologically.

That leaves the Church with three tasks:

- We need to facilitate for people that personal encounter with God. In other words, we need to impart a strong personal spirituality, the foundation of which is that experience of mercy.
- We need to imbibe the life of Christ which is a life lived with and for others. That is a contemplative task but one which requires real community expression of some sort. It's not just "me and Jesus". It is striking to me that those who have already a deep, personal encounter with God's mercy usually move freely into community life of one sort or another.
- And finally, knowing what God has in mind for us all, the communion of His love, we then anticipate it practically here and now. Sometimes in symbolic gesture, sometimes in costly action.

Hope in the Church?

Pope Francis has used his role as master of the symbolic gesture in that remarkable *Urbi et Orbi* blessing which captured the essence of what Pope Benedict speaks of: the personal closeness of a God to His beloved people in the midst of their affliction. A God who turns up even when the people can't! And a God who goes out into the city and the world, to protect and to heal. And then what was expressed symbolically spurs us all into action, to enact the compassion of the Kingdom here and now. And that is the direction in which our minds now ought to be turning...