

The gift of things unseen: A digital Compline experiment

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There is a bumper sticker that reads: “Jesus is coming, look busy.” It may simply be a bit of clever irreverence, but its prophetic edge cuts deep. As a priest I often feel the pull to look busy. A tendency I observe in myself, and perhaps I’m not alone in this, is a difficulty in sharing ministry. Now, I am happy to give away freely from the list of ‘things-that-just-have-to-get-done-but-I-don’t-want-to-have-to-do-them’. But I have a harder time sharing the ‘good stuff’ – leading formation groups, preaching, praying. I feel like I have to earn my keep and the way I show that I am worth keeping around is to be seen doing these ‘spiritual’ things. If someone else does them, what does the church need me for?

When the pandemic hit in March I began to lead compline every night livestreamed on Facebook. It seemed an appropriately peaceful response to anxious times. I realized though, that I wasn’t just offering compline to make a peaceful space for my parishioners, but also, on some level, assuring myself that I was doing something of measurable value. My other visible ministries were gone, but my face was there on the screen every evening at 9 o’clock. Even as I was trying to make a calm space for others, I was tending to my egoic need to look busy and prove my worth.

One of my mentors in ministry, as we were leaving a nursing home service where many were living in various stages of dementia, some visibly unresponsive, offered this wisdom: ‘so much of what we do in ministry is unseen.’ I took this to mean the impact of what we did is hidden to us. Now I am struck that it can also mean no one sees what we’re doing. Frequently in the ordination service the language of ‘building up’ the church is employed to direct the vocation of the priest. In Eph 4, Paul says that some are given gifts as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body – not to horde all the work of ministry for themselves.

During the pandemic we have lost many regular opportunities for our laypeople to exercise their ministries in the church. We have learned how to keep our readers and intercessors involved, but our altar guilds, sidespeople, choristers, and many others have lost opportunities to serve together. (One question the pandemic has no doubt raised for them is ‘do I miss these things?’ Or will they have found that they did them more out of a sense of obligation than vocation?)

I had been leading compline nightly for a month. As it became clear that we would not be gathering again soon, knowing that this ministry should carry on, I invited others to take a turn in leading our night prayers. Two parishioners with administrative gifts helped me assemble a team of men and women to lead the prayers. Now I only lead once a week. This has been a gift to me as I get to receive the ministry of these wise and sincere people, and my egoic need to be seen doing is being subverted. It has also been a gift to our community where many have felt a greater sense of connection to the whole church by praying with a variety of people they know and love, and even some they don’t know. And it has been a gift to the people who have started leading our prayers. In their own words on how praying compline has shaped their experience and understanding of prayer in their lives:

“Since starting in late March I have not missed an evening and I find it comforting. I do not always stay focused on the prayers but I find myself praying more during the day, and talking about prayer and how it has become something routine in my life.”

“It has made quite a difference. The regularity of it is priceless. It is a discipline and it gives me a place to come to that feels like home. I feel called to pray with others.”

“I have had an up and down experience with church and religion so I didn’t pray much. Now it’s something I look forward to that I wouldn’t have looked forward to before. With compline there is something positive, grounding, in the midst of chaos.”

The pandemic has raised the question of how we are formed as a community of disciples, while at the same time confronting the deadly sin of clericalism. This compline experiment has been a reminder that engagement and leadership are important aspects of formation. How can we make sure the gifts of the whole community are activated during the pandemic and beyond so that this formation can continue? How can we overcome the temptations of clericalism so that we can be built up into the ‘measure of the full stature of Christ?’