



Empty piazzas, filled spaces

Today we publish in English the first of a series of articles on “Living through the Crisis”, prepared by Father Federico Lombardi, SJ. Covid-19 has emptied gathering spaces worldwide. That includes St Peter’s Square, “the Pope’s piazza”. Today Pope Francis speaks to the “square” assembled by the media, where compassion, expectation and hope intersect...

By Father Federico Lombardi

In this period, millions and millions of people in Italy and around the world have followed, and are following, the moments of prayer led by the Pope through television and social media. It is an extraordinary level of listening. And no wonder. With every dimension of physical participation and relationships that we have given up, the situation naturally leads us to compensate with communication through media. Beyond that, it leads us to look for that word and that image that meets our profound expectation for consolation, of seeking light in times of darkness, and comfort in times of uncertainty.

When Pope Francis began to celebrate morning Mass in Santa Marta with a group of the faithful - one of the first and most characteristic innovations of his pontificate - a request came immediately (from TV 2000, the television station operated by the Italian Bishops’ Conference) to transmit it so that a wider audience could follow that touching moment of prayer with the Pope. I remember well that at that time it was discussed with the Pope himself and the request was taken into consideration. The conclusion then was not to broadcast that Mass live, because, unlike public celebrations, it was intended to preserve a more intimate and private, simple and spontaneous character, without the celebrant and the assembly having to feel that

they were before the eyes of the world. Certainly, it was possible to broadcast highlights and brief images of the homily and the Liturgy, but not to broadcast it in its entirety. In fact, there were many other occasions in which a large audience could follow the Pope, who intentionally addressed not only those present, but a much larger audience connected by radio, television or other media.

Now the situation has changed. There is no assembly of the faithful in Santa Marta, not even a small one. In addition, the Pope's Mass - which he celebrates almost alone - is broadcast live and followed by a very large number of people. They receive comfort and consolation, they join him in prayer and are invited by him to "make a spiritual communion" because they cannot receive the Lord's Body [sacramentally]. The mystery celebrated is the same, but the way of participating in it has changed. In his homily, Pope Francis loves to look into the eyes of those present and dialogue with them. Now his gaze and his voice are mediated by technology, but they still manage to reach the heart. The assembly is no longer physically present, but it is there, and it is truly united, through the person of the celebrant, around the Lord who dies and rises again.

The experience of the Pope speaking and praying in the completely empty St Peter's Basilica, or even in St Peter's Square, is similar, and even more intense. How many times over the years have we found ourselves tossing out ever more impressive numbers of the faithful present: 50, 100, 200 thousand people... filling the Square, even spilling out onto the *Via della Conciliazione*, at times as far as the Tiber River... The place of countless assemblies... Over the past century we had learned to gradually add to this physical presence many other people who, thanks to radio, then television, then the new instruments of communication, extended those assemblies to different parts of the world. The *Urbi et Orbi Blessings*: in particular, Pope John Paul II, with his Christmas and Easter greetings in dozens of languages, helped us understand that the great assembly gathered in the Square was the centre, the heart of a much larger assembly, spread throughout all the continents, united by the desire to listen to a single message of salvation, thanks to the Pope's voice.

Now we see the Square absolutely empty—but the larger assembly is present spiritually, if not physically, and is perhaps even more numerous and more intensely united than on other occasions. At this time, only the Pope can be present in St Peter's Square, as in the Chapel of Santa Marta. However, the Church, the universal assembly of the faithful, is really and profoundly united by very deep bonds rooted in faith and in the human heart.

The Square is empty, but in its emptiness, one perceives the very intense presence and the intersection of spiritual relationships of love, compassion, suffering, desire, expectation, hope... It is a strong sign of the Spirit's presence, which holds together the "Mystical Body" of Christ: a

spiritual reality which manifests itself when the assembly is physically united and present, but which is not bound and limited to physical presence, and paradoxically, in these days, can be experienced in a stronger and more explicit way. “The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit”, as Jesus said in the night to Nicodemus (John 3:8).