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INTERVIEW/REIG PLA

"The virus has exposed the individualist lie; we cannot deprive ourselves of the Mass"

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"The pandemic has brought to light the precariousness of the human being and exposed the individualist lie, which has favored the breaking of bonds with the family, with tradition and with God." The Spanish bishop Juan Antonio Reig Pla explained to The Daily Compass why he has decided not to suspend Masses with the faithful: "The Holy Mass is heaven on earth, and without it man loses his soul." The coronavirus is a blow for "the pride of globalism and our technocratic society," but also for the Church that now "ought to turn to the decisive questions of human salvation."



"The Mass is Heaven on earth. We cannot deprive ourselves of it, especially now that the crisis of the coronavirus is bringing to light the individualism of society. By means of this decision I wanted to emphasize that God never abandons us."

This is how the Archbishop of Alcalá, Juan Antonio Reig Pla, explained in an interview with *The Daily Compass* his decision not to suspend Masses with the faithful, while taking the necessary health precautions.

Your Excellency, why have you decided to keep your churches open and to continue offering Masses with the faithful?

As bishop, I have decided to leave the churches open and also to maintain the usual times for the celebration of Holy Mass. By means of this decision I wanted to offer to the faithful a sign that the Church never abandons those who are in need of divine help, and in particular those who need the Sacraments. And so, for the celebration of Mass we are following all the preventive measures recommended by the health authorities. Furthermore, each day at noon and at 8:30 P.M., the cathedral bells are

tolling twice, calling people to prayer for the needs this epidemic has provoked. Among the many human goods (goods that are useful, goods that are pleasant, the moral good, etc.), the greatest good is our spiritual good, which is tied to the eternal destiny of man. And this is why we cannot deprive the faithful of the divine gifts – and especially the Eucharist – even in extreme circumstances like those we are presently facing.

It is important to keep a safe distance from people, but isn't it still more important to give the faithful the Bread from Heaven?

Not only are we keeping safe distance between everyone, but we are also following all of the precautions that have been advised in order to prevent the spread of the disease: the priests are washing their hands, the floor and pews are being disinfected as well as the sacred vessels, etc. Although all this is of great importance, none of these things satisfy the desire of the human heart for the infinite. For this reason, in addition to the people's need for safety measures, it is unthinkable that the Church would not be present to the people with her specific mission: offering the salvation of Jesus Christ by means of prayer, the preaching of the Word, and the Sacraments.



What significance should be given to the Mass in these days? Is it indispensable?

The Holy Mass is Heaven on earth. This is true at all times, but even more so in a situation of extreme gravity like the one we are living through. Without the presence of Heaven made present in the humanity of Christ, which continues now in the Sacraments, man loses his soul. In situations like this and for good reasons people may be dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass, but there is no need to deny the Bread from Heaven to those who are able to come to Mass and who desire the comfort of God, always following the preventive measures given by the health authorities. The faithful who participate in the Sacraments are aware of their responsibility and they are offering the Holy Mass for all those who are suffering in the

pandemic.

Have you received criticisms? Do these criticisms perhaps show that people are thinking more of the health of the body than the health of the soul?

I have received some directions and suggestions to improve the celebrations, as well as some doubts. There have been some very blunt criticisms, but in fact I also received many demonstrations of gratitude. However, it is understandable that there are uncertainties among the faithful. Knowing that the spiritual good is the greatest good is in direct contrast with the spirit of the world, a spirit that can also penetrate into the Church. But in this regard the words of the Lord are very consoling: "In the world you will have tribulation, but have faith; I have overcome the world!" (Jn 16:33).

Have you ever received pressure from the government or been obliged to close the Churches or suspend the Mass? How is the government treating the bishops?

Thanks be to God, we have not received any pressure from the government. The government's *Decreto de Alarma* foresees people being able to participate in religious worship if they follow the established preventive measures. Depending on the circumstances, we will take appropriate measures.

One aspect of the crisis that we are experiencing here in Italy is the fact that many hospital chaplains are not being allowed to enter into intensive care units, and so people are dying totally alone. How are you regulating this situation in your diocese? Are chaplains able to bring the Sacraments to the sick and the dying?

The situation in the hospitals within the diocese is concerning because of the high number of infected people. The priests are carrying out their ministry with the necessary prudence, following the established precautions. Up until now, they have been able to go and bring the sacraments to individuals or families who request them. With regard to patients recovering in intensive care wards, there are special restrictions and it is not always possible to have access to them.

To what extent should we see the coronavirus as a chastisement, as purification sent to us by God?

The coronavirus pandemic has brought us to an extreme situation. It has brought to light the precariousness of the human being and exposed the individualist lie, which has favored the breaking of bonds with the family, with tradition and with God. The pride of globalism and our technocratic society has suffered a strong blow. We ought to recognize our weakness and our dependence on each other, but also our dependence on the loving wisdom of God our Creator and Redeemer. In a particular way, the West needs to be purified and to return to Christian tradition, which offers a true response to the questions of man and calls him to a life of virtue. This is both a time of testing and a time of grace. Only God can transform this arduous situation into an occasion of salvation for the human spirit.

What is this virus saying to the Church today? What should the Church be asking herself?

Obviously, this situation also strikes the Church, and this brings us back to fundamental questions regarding human salvation. The Church is not only a human organization, an NGO. At her heart she brings the offer of eternal salvation paid for at the price of the blood of Christ. This pandemic invites all of us to turn our hearts to God, to insist on the eternal destiny of man and to place the emphasis on the grace of God, to restore human connections, to place the emphasis on the family, the Christian community, and the means of salvation (prayer, the Word of God, Sacraments, charity, etc.). In the face of the pride of individualism and radical autonomy, this is an occasion to transform the concept of freedom, which does not only mean independence and the breaking of bonds. Our created freedom is for the sake of communion and a loving dependence on the Wisdom of God. Rediscovering Christ, letting ourselves be embraced by his redemptive grace and learning to live in community are the challenges we face in order to put the Church and society back on its feet.