



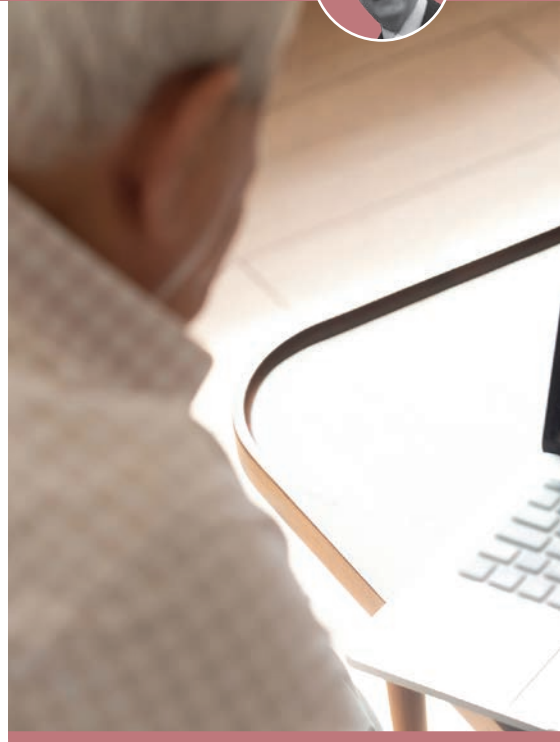
Sustaining Faith

In the different reality of COVID-19, **Ronan Barry** wonders how our faith will be sustained going forward. How virtual can faith be? How can a new generation find ways of discovering faith? He suggests that while answers may be few, a way forward can be found.

Every time I go to an airport, I travel through customs and passport control like clockwork. Then I travel on to the luggage belt to collect my bag. It is a brilliant system. I, along with many other people, are happy with this system. Then one day, imagine, you arrived at the luggage belt and you wait, and nothing comes out.

I have shared this analogy many times to talk about faith and tradition. As a Church, we have had systems over many years that have sustained faith in our communities. In the different reality of the COVID-19 world, I am wondering what will sustain our faith going forward. We have lived in an era without a 'live' Eucharist and some will take more time in returning. Church gatherings are few and it may be some time before we meet again for pastoral occasions.

Our children received faith from parents supported through the



sacramental system of our community of faith. Families were supported by community celebrations of Eucharist along with many other faith initiatives. Currently that faith community support programme is no longer working in the same way. In a sense we are left waiting for our luggage, as we cannot currently say when things will return to normal, if ever. So, we must ask what will support us going forward.

Will 'virtual reality' as currently experienced today support the embedding of the faith for the next generation? I do not have an answer to this question, but I would like to share some of my thoughts on this



question.

Recently I spoke to a youth group through a virtual app and asked them some questions; what was their experience around sharing prayer, friendship, ideas on virtual reality? The feedback was helpful and offered some insight. Some of the comments included: 'virtual reality is not the same as real life', 'friendships cannot be started or maintained through virtual communication'. Another insight was 'having Mass on TV/ laptops/phones is boring and does not engage people'. Another young person commented, 'school as a virtual programme is hard enough' without having all prayer time on

screens. The most telling comment was, 'everyone told us screen time was bad for us before 12 March, now we are to live and pray by it, I'm confused'.

The discussion was continued with parents and leaders. It was agreed that presenting the same Church experience on a screen is not going to sustain young people or their families. The current reality is that young people and families are struggling with life. Challenging experiences include care of elderly parents, care for young children, job losses, bereavement, among others.

Pope Francis at the Synod on Young People used the Emmaus story in Luke 24 to model a way of being involved in mission. In this gospel scene, Jesus asked for the two to share the story of their times, 'warts and all'. He offered a perspective on these events that offered insight. Jesus didn't impose himself on the two followers, but they invited him to stay as he made his way away from them in the evening. After the invite, Jesus then delved deeper into his love of God by sharing God's word and Eucharist. The two followers then come to a moment of transformation and their 'hearts burnt within them' (Luke 24:32). They changed and were missioned through this experience to share the Good News.

Can our Church today offer the Good News as proclaimed by the Gospel in this new experience? I'm unsure but I'm left with wondering why in some churches, webcams are switched off after Mass or the altar is

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left bare. Is it possible that we could use public spaces outside churches to help to inspire community now and, after COVID-19? We have churches in every community, how can we offer supportive service through this resource?

We will need faith-led leadership, rooted in compassion and love. Is it possible to invest in an online training of Eucharistic ministers, so families can bring Eucharist to those cocooned at home? Can our church offer space now to help us think about ways to bring healing needed by people in a

new normality? How can we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation – by phone or Zoom?

In summary, the fears articulated by the young people and the leaders are that the system does not offer new ways to access the luggage. It expects people to 'wait and wait' until the system is back to normal. Accessing a sustainable faith through a computer screen is not possible for a long period of time.

As we accept this new reality, we will be constantly challenged to sustain our faith in new ways. ❤️

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