

Essay title: “Padre, la misa no me sabe igual”: Catholic Mass and the Senses During the Covid-19 Pandemic

In March of 2020, as uncertainty and alarm over the Covid-19 pandemic grew, our daily lives were drastically altered. We learned to wear masks, schools transitioned to virtual instruction, and many of our jobs became remote. The religious lives of many were also altered. Places of worship temporarily cancelled their regular in-person meetings, transitioned to digital platforms like Zoom or YouTube, or adjusted in other creative ways. This was the case at Our Lady of Guadalupe (OLG), a predominantly Latinx parish in Ferguson, Missouri where I have conducted ethnographic research since 2018.

In late March of 2020, the Archdiocese of St. Louis suspended all public Masses and in-person liturgical celebrations. By late May, the Archdiocese allowed in-person Masses to resume at the discretion of parish priests.¹² The priest at OLG decided that returning to indoor Masses posed too great of a health risk for his parish. Instead, OLG got creative and opted to offer “drive-in” Spanish-language masses; parishioners drove into the church parking lot, found a spot to park their car, and tuned in to 88.3 FM on their car radio to listen to their priest conduct a live Mass from a makeshift altar atop the steps near the church entrance.

[Photograph 1][Caption: Our Lady of Guadalupe parish priest celebrates Mass from makeshift altar][Photograph by Carlos Ruiz Martinez]

Drive-in mass at OLG is an example of the savvy and creative ways that religious communities adjusted during the COVID-19 pandemic. For some parishioners, however, this adjustment was accompanied by a deep sense of grief over the loss of the regular rituals and sacramental practices that had constituted their religious life before the pandemic. It is this deep sense of loss and grief that I want to focus on. As the pandemic raged, many advocated for us to remake our lives in ways that centered the facticity of modern science. Many of us took for granted that the gods, rituals, and putative superstitions that belong to the realm of the “religious” *should* be reformatted given the pressing circumstances. When some communities resisted and pressed on with in-person meetings, many were confused as to why some religious communities were so reticent to adjust their rituals and practices.

My intention in this essay is not to suggest that religious communities should be exempt from following public health guidelines. Instead, I simply want to highlight that just as there was a sense of loss when we were no longer able to see our family members, friends, or coworkers--those relationships that our modern affinities might lead us to consider “real” in a sense that relationships to gods are not commonly understood to be--so too was there a deep sense of grief and loss for religious communities who had to rethink their rituals and practices. In the case of

¹ Joseph Kenny, “Archdiocese Suspends All Public Masses,” *St. Louis Review*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.archstl.org/archdiocese-suspends-all-public-masses-5088>

² Archbishop Robert J. Carlson Grants General Permission to Resume Public Masses Beginning May 18,” Archdiocese of St. Louis Office of Communications and Planning, May 7, 2020, https://www.archstl.org/Portals/0/Documents/Communication_Planning/PressReleases/MEDIA%20RELEASE_Archbishop%20Carlson%20Grants%20General%20Permission%20to%20Resume%20Public%20Masses%20May%2018.pdf

drive-in mass at OLG, adjustments to the format of Mass altered how parishioners experienced and related to their God in ways that may bring discomfort to our modern assumptions.

By early July 2020, parishioners at OLG began to see that their co-religionists at nearby parishes were returning to indoor Mass. Consequently, a group of OLG parishioners requested an outdoor meeting with the parish priest to make it known that they wanted Mass to return to the church sanctuary. Willing to lend a listening ear to his parishioners, the parish priest accepted the request to meet. Late one summer evening, fifteen or so parishioners stood in front OLG. The priest stood atop the steps by the church entrance to greet and listen to his flock. I stood alongside parishioners to listen to what they had to say.

[Photograph 2][God at work tape used to help parishioners maintain social distancing inside the Our Lady of Guadalupe sanctuary][Photograph by Carlos Ruiz Martinez]

The group of parishioners present at the meeting—mostly working-class Latinx men--enumerated a list of reasons why they thought Spanish-language Mass should resume inside the church sanctuary rather than continue in the drive-in format it had followed since April. Other parishes were already resuming indoor mass, God would protect them from COVID-19, and safety and social distancing measures could be implemented inside, they argued. As I listened in on the outdoor meeting, my own affinities led me to readily dismiss parishioners' reasoning. *Of course the parish should not return to in person mass*, I smugly thought to myself.

While I remain convinced that OLG's decision to offer only drive-in Masses for as long as possible during the pandemic was the right choice, one parishioner's lament got to the heart of why reformatting religious rituals such as Mass was not as easy for parishioners as an outside observer might think. As the parish priest referenced CDC guidelines and public health information to bat away pleas for Mass to return to the church sanctuary, one exasperated parishioner broke down and said: "**Padre, la misa no me sabe igual,**" *Father, mass doesn't taste the same to me.*

I was seized by the parishioner's evocation of taste. I had never considered what a mass could *taste* like. While the phrase "no me sabe igual" is colloquially used in Spanish to express that something just doesn't quite feel the same anymore, the use of the phrase in this Catholic context raised questions about how the pandemic altered parishioner's religious world and their relationships to their God. After all, the height of a Catholic Mass is Holy Communion, through which Catholics (according to the catechism of the Catholic Church) orally consume Christ's literal blood and body in the Eucharist.³

To be sure, the parishioner lamented that mass in a general sense—and not the Eucharist specifically-- no longer tasted the same. But herein lies my point! What something tastes like is not separate from—and is in fact informed by—the accompanying smells, sounds, sights, and tactile sensations. Is how the Eucharist—the literal blood and body of Christ for Catholics --

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part Two, Section Two, Chapter one, Article Three "The Sacrament of the Eucharist," https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P44.HTM

tasted, not also determined by the accompanying smells, sounds, sights, and tactile sensations of the Mass?

We can read the parishioner's lament that Mass no longer tasted the same as simple displeasure about the pandemic's disruption of yet another aspect of life. But such a surface-level reading, I think, would do a disservice to the depth of parishioner's lament. After all, most of the parishioners present at the meeting had made their way to their parish after a hot and grueling workday in construction, landscaping, or restaurant service jobs. This was of paramount importance to them. Scholar of religion Robert Orsi suggests that "The study of religion is or ought to be the study of what human beings do to, for, and against the gods really present—using 'gods' as a synecdoche for all the special suprahuman beings with whom humans have been in relationship in different times and places—and what the gods really present do with, to, for, and against humans."⁴ Taking heed of Orsi's words, explaining away the parishioners' desire to return to indoor mass as simply disregard for public health would lead me to miss how the pandemic altered the ways that the Mass was intimately sensed, which in turn shapes how Christ is experienced in and through the Eucharist by these Catholics. If the *taste* of the Mass had been fundamentally altered, I began to consider how the pandemic also altered how it was heard, seen, smelled, and felt. In other words, I asked myself: what other senses worked together to produce a God that tasted so unfamiliar to this parishioner?

During the summer and fall of 2020, I regularly attended drive-in Mass at OLG. If before the pandemic the environment in the church sanctuary was curated to create and protect the sacrality of the Mass, in the parking lot this weekly gathering was always in contention with the unpredictability and uncontained elements of the outside world. Some of the differences between indoor and drive-in mass were small and obvious. During an indoor Mass at OLG before the pandemic, for example, I might grab on to the wooden pew in front of me or kneel on a cushioned kneeler as parishioners prepared to receive the Eucharist. This summer, however, parishioners might rest their hands on their steering wheels. Instead of kneeling on a cushioned kneeler as they prepared to take Communion, parishioners stepped outside of their cars to kneel on the parking lot's hard pavement.

Other differences were more pronounced. One Sunday afternoon as Mass was in progress, a group of neighborhood teenagers rode their bikes through the OLG parking lot. Completely unaware that people were *in* their cars actively listening to the live homily from their radios, the teenagers zigzagged their bikes around the parked cars. For the teenagers this was a just a parking lot where they could enjoy their Sunday afternoon bike ride. For parishioners sitting in their cars, the bikers were a distraction (and perhaps an interruption) to their sacred gathering. The sounds of drive-in Mass were also radically different. As I sat in my own car listening to the live Mass via an FM frequency, cars sped through the busy intersection adjacent to the parking lot, ambulance sirens competed with the hymns, and the sound of airplanes landing at the nearby Lambert International Airport constantly boomed overhead.

⁴ Robert Orsi, *History and Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4.

One Sunday, I was slightly late to drive-in Mass. This proved to be consequential for how I experienced the Mass. The only parking spaces that remained available were far away from the church building. As I tuned in to 88.3 FM, where I could listen to the priest conduct the Mass, I realized that it was difficult for me to get good reception of the radio waves emanating from the church building. The sounds of the Mass were grainy, and because reception was poor, they competed with other radio stations broadcasting at the same frequency. The prayers, hymns, and homily were constantly interrupted by commercials in the background.

[Audiogram 1][Caption: Cars in the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church parking lot listening to drive-in Mass accompanied by audio recording of woman singing as the sound fades in and out]

Each Sunday that I returned to drive-in Mass at OLG, I was reminded of the parishioner's words: "*la misa no me sabe igual.*" And how *could* it taste the same when everything that led up to the faithful's encounter with Christ in the Eucharist had been altered? Instead of looking up at a painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe inside the church sanctuary, parishioners faced their car's dashboard and teenagers biking through their holy celebration. Instead of listening to the hymns emanating from the church sound system, they often heard grainy sound that competed with booming airplanes overhead and blaring sirens whizzing by. Instead of kneeling by their pew, they kneeled on the hard and hot parking lot pavement as they prepared to receive communion.

To be sure, I remain convinced that OLG's decision to offer drive-in Mass during the pandemic was the correct choice. But my time spent at OLG also helped me—and I hope readers—understand that the pandemic altered people's relationships with what Orsi refers to as "the gods really present." Because the gods are unseen to us does not mean that they are any less consequential, any less important, and dare I say, any less real.