



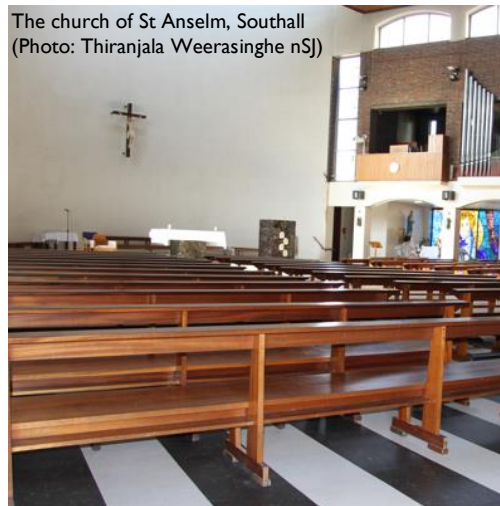
## Church doors locked but wide open

John Bosco Noronha nSJ

The experience of participating in the Mass remotely has undoubtedly been unusual for the many of us who now have to do so, but it is also an extraordinary thing to attend Mass in an empty church, says John Bosco Noronha nSJ. Loneliness, however, soon gave way to a consoling sense of unity in the body of Christ.

As I walked into the church of St Anselm in Southall for Mass on the morning of the fourth Sunday of Lent, the difference between that Sunday morning and every other could not have been more stark. I have not experienced a Mass here with fewer than 300 people, so sitting in the congregation with only our camera-woman, Sue, felt lonely to say the least. What struck me first was the echo, the echo that is unique to a large, empty, cold church. What had been, the day before, a space full of life and energy, now felt lifeless and bare. Almost like a tomb. The mourners have departed, I thought. This is what it is like after a funeral, when the grave lies unaccompanied and unvisited.

Next, I missed the faces. The faces raised in a greeting to me as I walked in. The faces tilted in prayer. The faces turned towards their neighbour in whispered conversation. The faces waiting in anticipation. Here it was just my face and the face of God looking down on me. As the bell rang and I stood alone, I felt a sense of responsibility. I was here at this Mass on behalf of the entire parish. Sue and I were representing the faithful thousands of St Anselm's. And I knew at this moment, when so many of them would no-



rmally be here, they would now be at home. They would be at home physically, but spiritually and mentally they would be here in the church. They would be casting their souls to this celebration. Their humble and contrite hearts were beating along with mine.

As this thought came to me, suddenly I didn't feel alone anymore. My responses were not solo. My prayers were not single arrows. I felt my St Anselm's family praying with me. It didn't matter that they were at home and would be waiting for the Mass to be uploaded so they could celebrate what we were celebrating now: I felt their presence beside me. And not just the regulars. I felt all the couples who had been married, all the babies that had been baptised, all those catechumens received into the Church. Finally, I felt all those who were part of our family who had died. There they were in heaven, with God our Father, celebrating with us. What a throng of bodies. What a multitude of faces. What a chorus of voices. As we were invited to share the peace of Christ with each other, I instinctively turned around to the empty church that was not empty and looked towards the locked doors that felt wide open, and sent out my peace.

As I went up to receive communion, a new perspective on those words I had just said was given to me: 'Lord, I am not worthy for you to enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.' I do not feel worthy to be the one chosen to be here, to represent this parish community, to receive on behalf of them. I am but a visitor here, who is travelling through and will be gone in a few weeks. Until then, however, my service is here. To be available in whatever way I am called to be. And if that is simply to be present at Mass and receive the Eucharist, then so be it, however unworthy I feel. That is enough.

Kneeling after communion, St Paul's words came to me: here we all were as one body, baptised in one spirit but in this moment in many, many parts, scattered across heaven and earth. 'Now you are the body, and each of you

is a part of it.' (1 Corinthians 12:27) Today I am the mouth, receiving the Eucharist on behalf of this great body. What an honour and a privilege to play this part. Oh God, I pray for the rest of my body. Extended far and wide may we feel each other's heartbeat. Spirit may we feel you binding us together. Jesus, may your body flow through me to nourish every part of my St Anselm's family.

This was Mass number one, on day one. I see now how this period is an invitation from the Lord to grow closer together spiritually, even as we remain separated physically.

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