

# The social impact of COVID-19

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A dossier by EARS on the impact of COVID-19 on  
society across 15 European countries



# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Belgium:</b> Recovering from the calamity in the heart of Europe	<b>6</b>
<b>Croatia:</b> Slow reactions from both the state and the Roman Catholic Church	<b>12</b>
<b>Denmark:</b> COVID-19 - A secular response from a secular population	<b>18</b>
<b>Finland:</b> Trust, polarisation, and the new role of the Church in the pandemic	<b>24</b>
<b>France:</b> COVID-19 and intergenerational awareness	<b>30</b>
<b>Germany:</b> When the pandemic adds fuel to fire	<b>36</b>
<b>Ireland:</b> Tradition, leadership, and religious rights during the pandemic	<b>42</b>
<b>Italy:</b> The pandemic as a time of conflict and solidarity	<b>48</b>
<b>Luxembourg:</b> Living through the pandemic in the 'laboratory of mobility'	<b>54</b>
<b>The Netherlands:</b> Freedom and moral duty in times of COVID-19	<b>58</b>
<b>Poland:</b> The war of Poles against Poles	<b>64</b>
<b>Serbia:</b> Does the vaccine make you an infidel or a responsible citizen?	<b>70</b>
<b>Spain:</b> COVID pushes religious groups towards a changing social role	<b>76</b>
<b>Sweden:</b> Recommendations first, restrictions last	<b>82</b>
<b>United Kingdom:</b> The same pandemic but unequal impacts	<b>88</b>
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Footnotes</b>	<b>104</b>





## Introduction

Europe is home to some of the world's finest and most densely populated cities. Nightlife, hospitality, and cultural events are essential to the European identity. Is there any other continent whose citizens have come to expect almost unrestricted travel across so many countries, spanning so many different cultures and languages?

But in little over two years, the pandemic has completely altered the lives of people in Europe and around the world. There are now children in kindergarten who have never known a world without COVID-19. People have lost their jobs, their homes, and their lives. Hospitals have never been so overwhelmed by suffering, both physically and mentally. The political and media landscape has shifted, with misinformation and fake news now everyday realities.

Some parts of society were galvanised by the pandemic, at least for a time, coming together in the face of a common if invisible enemy. However, it has been society's polarisation that has received more attention. Countries have been divided by age, religion, politics, and by views on vaccination, anti-pandemic restrictions, even the very existence of COVID-19.

Europe's religions have not been immune to these dramatic shifts. In many cases, religious communities have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic, with restrictions hindering communal worship. But not all governments treated religion equally. Some showed remarkable lenience, while others cracked down, raising questions of freedom of religion and spiritual vs. physical wellbeing. How religions responded to the pandemic often demonstrated their underlying priorities, motivations, and values.

The 15 countries covered in this dossier were analysed by analysts from across Europe, who are either native to or very familiar with that nation. Each chapter reflects the first-hand experiences of scholars of religion, and their assessment of how the pandemic has affected their country.





## Belgium: Recovering from the calamity in the heart of Europe

### February 2020: the virus emerges

After the unimaginably quick spread of COVID-19 in Italy and southern Europe, Belgium also detected the first cases in February 2020. What at first appeared to be an innocent flu became a nightmare scenario. During the first months of the European coronavirus crisis, Belgium topped the inglorious list of COVID-19 deaths per capita. In fact, until the beginning of March 2021, no other country had more deaths per capita. More than two years later, Belgium crossed the tragic milestone of 30,000 deaths as a result of the virus. Attempting to explain this number, scientists point to Belgium's high population density and the central location in Europe, but also to its extremely meticulous way of counting (people suffering from cancer in nursing homes for instance, were also counted as COVID-19 deaths if they were infected, in contrast to other countries). As a result, the numbers perhaps exaggerated the situation in comparison to other countries.<sup>1,2</sup>

### From a response of togetherness emerged increasing division

Despite this dire news, the Belgians - like other Europeans - found an answer to the crisis: solidarity. They clapped every night to support nurses and doctors and for once, the everlasting division between French- and Dutch-speaking Belgians was put aside. During the first lockdown, numerous volunteers helped the elderly and the poor, and a sense of togetherness reigned.<sup>3</sup>

However, as time passed, doubts about this optimism grew. The so-called 'yoyo-policy' with lockdowns following right after each other, caused many to lose their faith in the power of solidarity that was so important early on in the pandemic. Just as in the rest of Europe, the discussion about the vaccination campaign can be seen as embodying this division. The gap between anti-vaxxers and the rest of society grew more and more and was fed by an unstoppable stream of fake news on social media.<sup>4</sup>

Similar to other countries, the consequences of the consecutive lockdowns were felt in the psychologists' waiting rooms. For young students in particular, the isolation was a hard cross to bear.<sup>5</sup> Many sought relief in lockdown parties,<sup>6</sup> but this only widened the gaps between generations and societal divisions.

### Religious answers in changing times

In Belgium, religion was not put first by the government when deciding on restrictions to limit the spread of the virus. Masses and other religious services were not possible during the various lockdowns. According to some, this was even more the case than in other countries. Let's take a look at how different religious communities, in particular Christians, Jews, and Muslims, reacted to this serious challenge.

**Religion was not put first by the government when deciding on restrictions to limit the spread of the virus.**

### A loyal follower: the Catholic Church

The Christian Catholic Church historically helped to establish Belgium<sup>7</sup> and fought the pandemic side by side with the government. Bishop Bonny of Antwerp explains that it was a conscious choice to establish themselves as loyal to the government's decisions.<sup>8</sup> All over the country, churches started organising live streams so as not to abandon their parishioners.<sup>9</sup> When the question of vaccinations arose in the public debate, the Belgian bishops loyally referred to Pope Francis and his call to Catholics to be vaccinated.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that the Catholic Church never officially criticised the harsh limitations, some believers and even theologians did. Hans Geybels from the KULeuven, for instance, wrote in an opinion article that neglecting the needs of religions right in the time of crisis was unjust. He asked: why can people stand close to each other in shops, but Mass - even with distance measures - is not possible?<sup>11</sup>

Bishop Bonny furthermore stressed that the impact of COVID-19 was severe: "People have to deal with more and more sorrows. Not being able to help them as we could hurts me." On the other hand, he is also hopeful for the future of the Church after COVID-19, as he explains that the pandemic has shown us not only that life should be more than working in an office, but also how important social networks and religion are.<sup>12</sup>

### The Muslim community: scapegoat or loyal follower?

The Islamic community is historically relatively new in Belgium. However, the Muslim community is young and growing quickly. Already 7.6% of the Belgian population is a follower of the Islamic faith: the majority of

them are Moroccans and Turks, descendants of immigrant workers in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the tendency in other countries to exaggerate Muslims' violations of the coronavirus measures and scapegoat Islam,<sup>14 15 16</sup> the Belgian Muslim community followed the restrictions. The period of Ramadan for instance, had to be held in lockdown twice (in 2020 and 2021) but the overwhelming majority could be seen as exemplary followers of the rules. Some mosques even installed screens to livestream meetings in a professional way.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the Muslim Executive (head of all Muslims in the country) repeatedly called believers to follow the measures and to get vaccinated.<sup>18 19</sup>

### Orthodox Jews in Antwerp stand for religious rights

Antwerp, the second-largest city of the country, hosts a true ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood like New York and Jerusalem. Here, around 25,000 Jews live a strictly religious life and speak Yiddish as their mother tongue. In the beginning of the pandemic, a small minority of this Jewish community disregarded the rules and gathered in synagogues even though this was strictly forbidden.<sup>20</sup> This tendency corresponds with the behaviour of some ultra-religious Jewish communities in Israel and the USA.<sup>21</sup>

In the second lockdown in autumn 2020, members of the community even went to the Council of State to demand the right of gatherings in the synagogue. At that time, marriages for instance were only possible with five attendees, but the Jewish law demands at least ten men for a valid marriage. The strict rule, which was heavily criticised, was abolished as the court argued that the limitations on religious services were disproportionate:<sup>22 23</sup> the right to religion is enshrined in the Constitution. The victory of religious services was also welcomed by Catholics and other religious groups.

### What is next?

As expressed by Bishop Bonny, the pandemic has shown how vital local networks and religious services are. In addition, many may have had more time to appreciate a spiritual life. The spirit of reconciliation and solidarity - two Catholic key values - of the first lockdown could also have given the Church a boost.

However, the limitations of Masses also caused many to lose the habit of going to Church, as digital alternatives were not possible for everyone. On the other hand, the digitalisation of religious services does provide new opportunities for the future. The same, of course, can be said of all religious communities, with each of them suffering from the deprivation of social contact. The following years will be crucial to determine the impact of COVID-19 on religious communities.

*Luca Van Cleempoel*

 **The pandemic has shown how vital local networks and religious services are.**



## Croatia: Slow reactions from both the state and the Roman Catholic Church

### Debate on the justification of the ban on movement

The first case of coronavirus in Croatia was recorded on February 20, 2020, when it was stated that a 25-year-old man contracted the virus.<sup>24</sup> As early as March, state councils made decisions to close cultural institutions and ban large public gatherings.<sup>25</sup> In addition, crossing state borders was banned, except for returning Croatian citizens.<sup>26</sup> The adoption of these bans raised the issue of endangering constitutional freedom of movement. Public opinion was quick to ask about people who were exempt from this rule, such as deputies, judges of the Constitutional Court, and diplomats.<sup>27</sup> There was much heated debate on social media about whether such a ban on movement was justified.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the debate highlighted certain contradictions of the restrictions, as it prohibited movement within Croatian districts but allowed departure from the country.<sup>29</sup>

### The ambiguous attitude of the Church

The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia is the largest religious community and has a great influence on society and public opinion. During the first waves of the pandemic, the Church was very restrained, and many people criticised it for not adhering to the measures prescribed by the state to prevent the spread of the virus.<sup>30</sup> Clergy and bishops in Croatia had different views on the pandemic, so conflicting statements were

made to the public. Some bishops supported the position of Pope Francis on the issue of compliance with measures.<sup>31</sup>

The pope was completely clear in calling the faithful to get vaccinated.<sup>32</sup> However, the permanent council of the Croatian Bishops' Conference issued a statement that all methods of treatment and vaccination must depend on the principle of free will. This statement has been interpreted in various ways.<sup>33</sup>

**The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia is the largest religious community and has a great influence on society and public opinion.**

#### **Whether to support the pope or the anti-vaccine movement**

Anti-vaccine movements interpreted the Croatian Catholic Conference's message as support for their principles and continued to spread their propaganda.<sup>34</sup> The Croatian cardinal, Josif Bozanic, stated that the Church would respect all measures from the state regarding the pandemic, but that it would continue to serve Mass, which was a clear act against the measures.<sup>35</sup> Even a professor at the Roman Catholic Theological Faculty in Croatia, Ružica Razum, denounced the Croatian

state body for fighting the pandemic, and accused it of being in the service of a global conspiracy.<sup>36</sup> Thus, there was a significant part of the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia that did not support anti-pandemic measures.

Some clerics who violated anti-pandemic restrictions received criminal convictions.<sup>37</sup> Public opinion also condemned the Church in the media for multiple violations of measures when it organised large celebrations and gatherings in which even members of parliament participated.<sup>38</sup>

#### **The Roman Catholic Church in Croatia divided in supporting the pope**

The Church in Croatia was silent about vaccination for almost a whole year and gave no clear views.<sup>39</sup> Even though the Roman Catholic Church did not have an official stance, Pope Francis had a very clear attitude towards vaccination. He strongly supported getting vaccinated and called it an "act of love."<sup>40</sup> The Vatican also made a decision that it was no longer possible to enter the Vatican without a COVID-19 pass.<sup>41</sup> However, the Church in Croatia remained silent about the Vatican's using COVID-19 passes.<sup>42</sup> Croatian Cardinal Josip Bozanic, even after 9,000 deaths in Croatia from the virus, remained silent on the topic of vaccinations.<sup>43</sup>

#### **The church is late with vaccination support**

After almost a year of silence and not explicitly inviting believers to be vaccinated, the Roman Catholic Church in Croatia issued a public statement calling on citizens to be vaccinated, but insisted that vaccination be an expression of free will.<sup>44</sup> Shortly after this announcement, the Church issued two more, where it called on the



faithful to be vaccinated voluntarily in order to prevent the transmission of the virus in Croatia and to suppress the pandemic as soon as possible.<sup>45</sup>

Although the Church eventually supported vaccination, the question of ethics immediately arose. The Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Vladimir Dugalic, pointed out that there are vaccines that are unethical (Russian, Chinese, and Oxford) because they are made using cells taken from embryos. Believers would commit a passive sin by receiving one of these vaccines. On the other hand, the Dean commented that RNA vaccines are ethical because they are not grown from cells but have been synthesised. Because of this, by taking RNA vaccines, believers would not commit a sin.<sup>46</sup>

### **Speed of adoption of measures and their implementation**

While they were waiting for the advice of the Roman Catholic Church, Croatian society was divided by the pandemic. The measures were strict, but there were exceptions. Some members of the parliament and clergy violated those measures, and anti-vaccine movements saw these violations as support for their ideas. However, in the end, the Roman Catholic Church decided to respect the findings of science and join the pope in calling for vaccination. The media criticised the government and the Church for violating the measures, thereby showing the level of freedom of speech in Croatia even within the extraordinary conditions of the pandemic. The pandemic certainly showed the divisions of Croatian society, but also the strength of the Roman Catholic Church in influencing it.

***Marko Pavlović***

## Denmark: COVID-19 – A secular response from a secular population

COVID-19 is far from the first pandemic to hit the world. However, during other pandemics (such as the Spanish flu at the beginning of the 1900s), religious institutions in Europe were kept open to provide comfort to people in a time of crisis.<sup>47</sup> This has not been the case with the COVID-19 pandemic, where many religious institutions in Europe followed government advice to shut down, prioritising people's physical safety.<sup>48</sup> This has not been without its challenges though – COVID-19 has had major impacts on Danish society.

### Faith and COVID-19

Though the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened people's faith in countries like the US (25% of Americans stated that their faith was strengthened as a result of the pandemic), this has not been the case in Denmark.<sup>49</sup> Danes largely reported that they were not much affected by the lockdowns of religious institutions such as churches.<sup>50</sup> This is not surprising to scholars of religion and society, as Denmark is a country where people mostly use religious institutions for rites of passage such as weddings, funerals, and confirmations, and most define themselves as 'cultural Christians'.<sup>51</sup>

### Online alternatives: enough to satisfy religious Danes?

Another side of the COVID-19 pandemic that has had a significant impact on society was the variety of online alternatives that many religious institutions offered during lockdowns.<sup>52</sup> Online alternatives

were especially helpful during Easter and Eid 2020, when the first lockdown happened in Denmark and many institutions and people were still adjusting to the 'new normal'.<sup>53</sup> Many online ceremonies and gatherings took place, which provided people with a sense of comfort while keeping them safe and socially distanced.

Though COVID-19 impacted Danish society negatively on a social, economic, and cultural level,<sup>54</sup> it seems that religious institutions have been some of the least affected by the pandemic. Religious institutions have in almost all cases followed government restrictions and provided good online alternatives to maintain a sense of community and still stay safe.<sup>55</sup> The pandemic has apparently not influenced people's belief in God or religion, either by weakening or strengthening their faith.<sup>56</sup> This is perhaps, as earlier stated, a result of Denmark not being a particularly religious country, and the closing of institutions therefore not affecting the average citizen's life as much as, for example, the closure of supermarkets, bars, cultural venues, and restaurants.

**“Danes largely reported that they were not much affected by the lockdowns of religious institutions such as churches.”**

### **The flipside to the pandemic: scapegoating**

One flipside to the pandemic, however, has been the way in which the minority Muslim population in Denmark has been scapegoated.<sup>57</sup> Though some radical Muslim communities in Denmark expressed beliefs of COVID-19 being 'God's punishment against non-Muslims',<sup>58</sup> some Danish imams, such as Ahmed Akkari, have spoken out against this publicly.<sup>59</sup>

Generally, the Muslim community has followed government regulations just as much as Christian communities have. Unfortunate targeting of the Muslim community, and coining their behaviour as 'deviant' towards COVID-19 guidelines without empirical evidence, has created a negative portrayal of the Muslim community in the Danish media.<sup>60 61</sup> This has been criticised by many public voices in Denmark, especially the specific targeting of the Somali community.<sup>62</sup>

However, the Somali community was not the only group that experienced scapegoating during the pandemic. The most direct example can be seen in the failed vaccination campaigns that the Danish government sent out, targeting Muslims with references to the Quran.<sup>63 64</sup> This was an attempt to try to ensure that the Muslim minority also got vaccinated.<sup>65</sup>

Given that the closure of churches affected most Danes very little, the pandemic's greatest impact on Danish religion might be a legacy of deepening division between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>66</sup>

### **Denmark and COVID-19: closure of religious institutions far from the biggest problem**

Overall, it does not seem that COVID-19 has affected religious aspects of Danish society. The biggest impact that the pandemic has had on religious communities seems to be through scapegoating and blaming the Muslim minority population for causing outbreaks and not following rules, even though there was little to no evidence that Muslims in Denmark were worse at following government regulations than any other religious groups.

***Hannah Macaulay***



## Finland: Trust, polarisation, and the new role of the Church in the pandemic


### Effects of COVID-19 on Finnish society

In Finland, COVID-19 has affected people's daily life economically, socially, and in terms of health too.<sup>68</sup> When the pandemic hit Finland in spring 2020, the number of unemployed increased by more than 200,000.<sup>69</sup> According to social workers, debt problems and the need for financial support and food assistance increased correspondingly.<sup>70</sup> At the end of the year, about a fifth of Finns reported that their economic situation had worsened during the pandemic.<sup>71</sup>

Loneliness and mental health problems increased as well, especially among adolescents, which was aggravated by a shortage of youth psychiatrists.<sup>72</sup> In relationship therapy, more and more couples considered divorce.<sup>73</sup> Staffing shortages worsened in healthcare services when COVID-19 patients began to fill the hospitals.<sup>74</sup> In addition, cold storage facilities for the deceased became overcrowded as more people wanted to postpone funerals because of the COVID-19 restrictions on church services.<sup>75</sup>

### Polarisation of pro- and anti-vaccination groups

Despite the worsened economic, social, and healthcare situations, during the spring and summer of 2020, confidence in government, authorities, researchers, and media was exceptionally high in Finland.<sup>76</sup>



## About a fifth of Finns reported that their economic situation had worsened during the pandemic.

However, compared to the overall population, supporters of the conservative right-wing party 'The Finns', trusted public institutions less than other people did.<sup>77</sup>

During the pandemic, confidence in institutions became even more polarised, as attitudes towards vaccines and medical science divided people.<sup>78</sup> Disinformation on social media brought together people believing in a range of conspiracy theories, often related to healthcare services and medical science.<sup>79</sup> During the pandemic, extremist groups took advantage of the polarised atmosphere, converting to their cause people disappointed in, and excluded from, society, especially the young.<sup>80</sup>

In Finland, anti-vaccination views increased among young adults and in small municipalities in particular.<sup>81</sup> Differences in attitudes towards vaccines did not appear only on (social) media but caused disputes and disagreements between families and close relationships too, sometimes even leading to breakups.<sup>82</sup>

### The response of religious communities

Some Finnish people opposed COVID-19 vaccines for religious reasons.<sup>83</sup> However, officially, all the biggest religions in Finland support

vaccines, and in 2021, the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland (consisting of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and the Latter-day Saints) urged everyone to get vaccinated.<sup>84</sup> In October 2021, Teemu Laajasalo, bishop of Helsinki, even wrote that "the unvaccinated bears responsibility for the suffering and death of a neighbour," which caused a spike in resignations from the Church as some interpreted his opinions as 'unchristian' and 'hate speech' against the unvaccinated.<sup>85</sup>

### The impact on church services

COVID-19 restrictions imposed under the Communicable Diseases Act during 2020–22 did not apply to religious communities and thus, churches did not have to limit the number of participants in their services. However, many churches still decided to livestream their services.<sup>86</sup> For instance, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Finland limited the number of participants during the worst waves of the pandemic. In the Catholic Church in Finland, participation in services was made voluntary, even though under normal circumstances, Catholics must attend Mass every Sunday.<sup>87</sup> Participation in religious services led to controversy and received media attention, as sometimes people were prohibited to attend even the funerals of loved ones.<sup>88</sup> In some cases, where some religious communities did not limit participation, many attendees were exposed to the virus.<sup>89 90</sup>

### New role of the Church in the pandemic

The role of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church as a welfare service provider was also strengthened during the pandemic. Between 2020 and 2021, hospital priests offered support and pastoral care to nursing staff about 40% more than before COVID-19.<sup>91</sup> Parishes began to distribute more food assistance to the most deprived,<sup>92</sup> and when there was a shortage

of COVID-19 vaccinators, some of the church deaconesses moved to work in public healthcare services as vaccinators.<sup>93</sup> Some parishes even offered their facilities for vaccination centres.<sup>94</sup> The Evangelical-Lutheran Church also responded to the increased mental health problems among adolescents by launching ‘walk-in therapy’ in Tampere in 2021.<sup>95</sup> Therapy was given free of charge and without an appointment or referral for 16–29-year olds. The concept was later adopted in other parishes too.<sup>96</sup>

### Where to next?

The pandemic showed the need for resilience, hope, and solidarity in Finnish society,<sup>97</sup> as many people became more vulnerable economically, socially, and in terms of health. In addition, polarisation between groups deepened. It will be interesting to see how the role of the church will develop in the future, and whether new practices – such as the streaming of services and the increased variety of duties for church employees – will be introduced on a permanent basis. Nevertheless, institutions providing help, support, and consolidation became valuable in a new way during difficult times.

*Rosa Huotari*



**The pandemic showed the need for resilience, hope, and solidarity in Finnish society.**

## France: COVID-19 and intergenerational awareness

Due to COVID-19, French citizens have experienced a series of lockdowns since March 2020.<sup>98</sup> Many had never undergone such severe restrictions of their mobility and sociability. Yet, these impediments were familiar to some of those ageing, or living with a disability.<sup>99 100</sup> As the memory of lockdowns seems to fade in the past, the question of whether this common living situation bridged generations or polarised them remains open.

In France, the major religious denomination is Catholicism. In the Catholic Church, however, the coexistence of younger and older generations is habitual. For example, more than half of the French Catholic priests are older than 65. Besides, almost half of their parishioners are also over 65 years old.<sup>101</sup> Dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, how did the Catholic Church use its previous experience with intergenerational solidarity?

### Different generations with diverging interests

French President Emmanuel Macron announced the first lockdown in a unifying speech. As he repeatedly declared “war against COVID,” he also called for “general mobilisation.”<sup>102</sup> At this stage, the archetype of ‘the COVID-19 victim’ was statistically understood to be a man, aged 60 years or more.<sup>103</sup> Public solidarity with the patients and medical staff appeared to be indisputable.<sup>104</sup>



However, in the wake of the second and third lockdowns,<sup>105</sup> a generational conflict emerged in the media. For instance, sociologists argued that lockdowns inflict a generational scar on students and young workers. Their chances of economic wellbeing and career development had been and would continue to be hindered, to the benefit of “boomers.”<sup>106</sup> <sup>107</sup> Statistics confirm this backlash.<sup>108</sup> Meanwhile, retirees increasingly expressed worries about the potential carelessness of students and young adults.<sup>109</sup>

### Only one communion for every age

While the French government prioritised the health of the older generations,<sup>110</sup> the Catholic Church did not. In this context, the Church’s dilemma was whether to accept or reject governmental rules.<sup>111</sup> Conservative bishops, priests, and believers demonstrated multiple times against the suspension of religious services. Others, including the French Bishops’ Conference, agreed to abide by governmental rules.<sup>112</sup> However, the government finally permitted practising believers to be able to pray and share communion together.<sup>113</sup> Because of Catholic activism, places of worship were in fact granted the right not to prioritise the health of older people.

### A new awareness of the living situations of the elderly

Since the second and third lockdowns, more attention has been paid to the dignity of seniors. Indeed, the human dignity of ageing people became a hot topic.<sup>114</sup> Members of the National Ethics Committee made a point that caring for the living is no more important than caring for the dying. They therefore argued that preventative measures such as the isolation of elderly people need to be limited.<sup>115</sup>

In January 2022, awareness around old age grew even more. Indeed, an investigative journalist revealed that the managers of at least 200 nursing homes seriously mistreat their residents. The inhabitants are denied food, exercise, and basic hygiene. Such abuse happened even before COVID-19.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, the scandal hit differently after elderly loved ones were stuck in those nursing homes for months on end. Even the younger generations put themselves in seniors’ shoes and publicly worried about the wellbeing of the elderly.<sup>117 118</sup>

### An innovative church for young and old

Catholic communities are familiar with caring for elderly people.<sup>119</sup> Nonetheless, people who felt too vulnerable to physically come to church kept joining Mass online.<sup>120</sup> The experience of lockdowns and remote community seemed to have convinced some older Catholics to stay at home. The average age of the physical congregation was lowered. This resulted in the apparent rejuvenation of the practising Catholic population.<sup>121</sup>

Still, since the beginning of the pandemic, many priests have asked to be able to visit older people in their homes. Lockdowns and concerns for the human dignity of seniors also reinvigorated the call for chaplaincy in hospitals and nursing homes to be considered a human right.<sup>122</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the inclusion of all generations within the Catholic Church relies on innovation. Back in 2020, Pope Francis himself asked that Catholics change their “pastoral habits, in response to the presence of so many elderly people in our families and communities.”<sup>123</sup>

## Redesigning intergenerational solidarity in a pandemic

The media treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic put (in part) the experience of elderly people centre-stage. Although intergenerational solidarity was not self-evident, multiple initiatives were taken towards mutual support. During lockdowns, young adults and retired people shared a common interest in feeling useful.<sup>124</sup> This may have facilitated solidarity between generations. Surveys show that older people financially sustained students, who were not necessarily their relatives. In return, young adults helped elders with groceries and digital communication.<sup>125</sup>

However, the meaning of solidarity has changed during the pandemic. In France, the Ministry of Solidarity came up with the motto: 'Quand on aime ses proches, on ne s'approche pas trop', meaning 'When I am close with someone, I do not get close to them'. Physical distancing in fact reduced the opportunities of helping one another. A philosopher notes in the newspaper La Croix that showing solidarity implied not showing solidarity.<sup>126</sup> Paradoxically, generations connected through isolation.

 **The meaning of solidarity has changed during the pandemic.**

## Physical or generational distancing?

The pandemic challenged intergenerational solidarity. During lockdowns, the media raised and testified to a new awareness around the living situations of people of different ages. Such realisation could have led to a generational conflict. On the contrary, it triggered a rethinking of intergenerational solidarity and compassion. However, social institutions like churches were necessary for concretely implementing mutual support among people young and old.

*Clémence Sauty*

## Germany: When the pandemic adds fuel to fire

The coronavirus crisis has not only restricted social life in Germany, but also put the spotlight on various kinds of problems. An example of this is the extreme staff shortage in the nursing sector. But above all, the pandemic has catapulted the importance of dying with dignity into people's minds in a drastic way. Before the pandemic, it was probably unthinkable for most people that the situation in Germany could come to such a head: old and sick people could not see their loved ones for a long time, sometimes never again. Many died lonely, without the support of their relatives.<sup>127</sup> Often it was not possible to say goodbye. Consoling church rituals and human closeness were missing.<sup>128</sup> Such events still need emotional and spiritual processing, but also theological reflection in the sense of evoking religious perspectives of comfort and hope.

### Missed opportunities

However, many people in Germany have critically remarked that such a conversation, especially on the part of the Church, was largely lacking during the crisis. The Catholic Church in particular was criticised for communicating Christian hope too little or not convincingly enough to people in need.<sup>129</sup> Instead, discussions about whether and how church services could be celebrated seemed to dominate. Thus, the opportunity to embody Christianity in an authentic and credible way, in order to let the message of the Gospel reach people actively, has altogether been used too little.<sup>130</sup>

### Between shock, deceleration, and newfound freedom

At the beginning of the pandemic, many Germans seemed to be in a state of disbelief, some even of shock. In the years before the pandemic, existential problems were viewed by many from a noble distance. It was basically other people who were affected.<sup>131</sup>

With the pandemic, however, this changed abruptly. After all, the virus could affect anyone, which made it particularly feared. The new situation, in which the pace of life slowed down, also seemed to open up new spaces for freedom and reflection. Many discovered how valuable time really is. The carousel of everyday life, which until then had seemed to spin faster and faster, suddenly came to a standstill.<sup>132</sup> Some people found peace and reflection for the first time in years, or even for the first time ever. Locality was rediscovered, but above all also walking in nature, combined with spiritual reflection.<sup>133 134</sup>

### Winners and losers

Over time, however, it became increasingly apparent that the pandemic would create winners and losers, especially in the field of education. The 'losers' were mainly those pupils who came from so-called socially weak and poorer families. They were not well enough equipped technically to participate in distance learning. In addition, without the support of school, they often received less care and encouragement to cooperate.<sup>135</sup>

As far as religious education was concerned, different developments could be observed. On the one hand, it was simply cancelled at many schools. Some school administrators were of the opinion that the subject, effectively superfluous, should take a back seat in favour of the main subjects.<sup>136</sup> In addition, the opportunities offered by religious

education were suddenly brought into focus: here were questions about the existential, about meaningfulness, and about a 'beyond'.<sup>137</sup> These were precisely the questions that emerged as so important during the pandemic.

### Parallel worlds: full intensive care units and coronavirus deniers

A split also occurred in the area of medical treatment. While staff in hospitals and care facilities in Germany, already stretched beyond capacity, were pushed to new physical and psychological limits by high numbers of COVID-19 patients, some people did not believe in the existence of the virus or dismissed the pandemic as a kind of cold virus.

The increasing restrictions on freedom through compulsory masks and testing, and closed shops and restaurants, made many Germans angry. They protested.<sup>138</sup> Dealing with the virus, its consequences for people's personal lives, and for the economy and culture, divided the nation even more. In addition, many no longer knew their way around a jungle of new regulations, the meaningfulness of which was sometimes doubted.<sup>139</sup>

**When various vaccines came on the market, the question arose as to who should get them first.**



Vaccination advocates and opponents

When various vaccines came on the market, the question arose as to who should get them first. Once again, opinions were divided. Particularly vulnerable people such as the elderly and sick, or the working population? The term ‘systemically relevant’ became the starting point for numerous (ethical) discussions about who belonged to the coveted and recognised group.<sup>140</sup>

For some, however, the new vaccines were not so desirable: quite a few Germans rejected vaccination against the coronavirus on principle. They saw their freedom to decide about their own bodies in danger. Others feared severe side effects with unforeseeable consequences. Once again, the nation was divided. The federal government could not bring itself to make vaccination compulsory. Instead, appeals were made to the population. Some church representatives gave voice to these appeals. Pope Francis and numerous representatives of the churches called on the population to get vaccinated, especially to protect the elderly and vulnerable people.<sup>141 142</sup>

The pandemic has made many social and church problems more visible, but it has also made people more aware of the issues of solidarity and cohesion. The latter are essentially important values that are held by all religions. The pandemic situation has highlighted their indispensable importance, but also the necessity of representing these values in a credible way. The churches, at least, have only succeeded to a limited extent.


*Maike Maria Domsel*

Personal Experience



*Maike Maria Domsel*

At the beginning of the pandemic, I observed a wide variety of reactions: from disbelief to fear to indifference towards this new strange virus. After the initial shock, many apparently felt the need for cohesion: the enforced distance created closeness when, for example, local musical events such as window and courtyard concerts became more and more popular, and later also the digital church services. Soon, however, the German ego seemed to make itself known again when people hoarded in the supermarkets or those who had lost a relative were given practically no space to mourn and remember.



## Ireland: Tradition, leadership, and religious rights during the pandemic

Like the majority of European countries, Ireland has been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of March 2022, two years on from the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in the country, Ireland had had 1.3 million cases of coronavirus and 6,570 deaths.<sup>143</sup> Statistically, these figures are significantly lower in comparison to some other European countries, such as the neighbouring United Kingdom (UK). Yet, when it comes to the social implications of COVID-19, the impact has been just as great in Ireland as elsewhere.

In particular, the coronavirus pandemic has affected religious life in Ireland. While Ireland's relationship with religion is in flux, it still remains a religious country by European standards. Upholding religious traditions is of specific importance,<sup>144</sup> something that was curtailed for much of the past two years. This chapter will assess the different ways in which COVID-19 impacted religious practice within Ireland and how religious communities and leaders responded to such challenges.

### Rituals interrupted

Even though religious affiliation is decreasing in the country, the Catholic Church still maintains a central presence in society.<sup>145</sup> Because of this, this chapter will focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Traditions are of great importance in Ireland and, in particular, are intrinsic to Catholicism. Bearing in mind that "Catholicism acts as a cultural

identity as well as a religious identity,” many Irish people, including those who do not regularly attend church, still observe traditional “Catholic life-cycle rituals.”<sup>146</sup>

However, with the arrival of the pandemic, these traditions were put on hold indefinitely. On the 17th March 2020, then Taoiseach<sup>147</sup> Leo Varadkar announced a national stay-at-home order and non-essential social activities were restricted. Funerals were permitted but only a handful of close relatives were allowed to attend.<sup>148</sup> For Irish Catholics, wakes and funerals typically involve entire communities but the restrictions meant that these “end-of-life rituals” were not possible.<sup>149</sup>

Moreover, beginning-of-life rituals, such as baptisms and confirmations, were also curtailed for over a year. Whilst life cycle ceremonies with 30 attendees were allowed to take place in the UK from May 2021, in July 2021, such ceremonies were deferred in Ireland due to the Delta variant.<sup>150</sup>

The Catholic primate Archbishop Eamon Martin explained that there was “a lot of frustration and deep disappointment” in response to this decision.<sup>151</sup> Considering that the majority of churches were following all safety precautions, many church leaders felt the government decision was not necessary and highlighted the Taoiseach’s lack of consideration for religious ceremonies.<sup>152</sup>



**Traditions are of great importance in Ireland and, in particular, are intrinsic to Catholicism.**

## Religious vs political authority

Such tensions over government coronavirus rules and public expressions of religion between religious and political leaders were not uncommon in Ireland. For example, in April 2021, Archbishop Eamon Martin expressed “deep concerns” over new restrictions that made the majority of religious gatherings illegal.<sup>153</sup> He said that people of faith in Ireland considered “respecting and sustaining people’s spiritual well-being” as vital and equal with concerns for physical and mental health.<sup>154</sup> Moreover, he argued that the “vital pastoral work” of religious ministers should also have been deemed essential.<sup>155</sup>

Furthermore, after life cycle ceremonies were deferred again in July 2021, Archbishop of Dublin, Dermot Farrell, told priests in his diocese to defy the government ban which he said was “discriminatory.”<sup>156</sup> The archbishop said it was perplexing that celebrations of the sacrament were restricted, yet “no such prohibitions are applied to other events, such as sporting or civic events.”<sup>157</sup>

The Taoiseach Micheál Martin said he did not approve of any “unilateral breaching” of COVID-19 regulations and wanted to know if it was “too much to ask” that the regulations were adhered to.<sup>158</sup> Clearly, the pandemic highlighted the feelings of some church leaders that religious expression was not being given appropriate freedoms.


## COVID-19 and crisis over leadership

Beyond restricting religious traditions and creating tensions between religious and political authority, COVID-19 has exacerbated already existing worries within the Church in Ireland. In particular, for many years, there have been grave concerns over the ageing population of Irish priests. Due to the lack of young people choosing to train to be religious leaders,<sup>159</sup> most priests in Ireland work until they are 75 years

old with some continuing working into their 80s and 90s.<sup>160</sup> Fr Hazelwood from the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) believes that bishops are “playing on the generosity” of priests by placing extra demands on them.<sup>161</sup> Fr Hoban from the ACP explains that, subsequently, there are “high levels of depression” and isolation amongst the clergy.<sup>162</sup>

This already existing concern was exacerbated by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the fact that older people are more at risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19,<sup>163</sup> it is not surprising that older members of the clergy have been affected by the pandemic. For example, the Spiritans, a Catholic group with five parishes in Ireland, lost 18 priests to the virus in one year.<sup>164</sup>

Moreover, whilst the shift from in-person to online services necessitated by the pandemic has been popular amongst many congregants,<sup>165</sup> it has been challenging for some older priests. Fr Hazelwood said that some priests are becoming increasingly anxious when performing online masses because of the pressure to be performers and the bad reviews from “mass-hopping” worshippers.<sup>166</sup>

 **The pandemic shone  
a light on pre-existing  
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population of Irish priests.**

Therefore, the pandemic shone a light on pre-existing concerns around the ageing population of Irish priests. Archbishop Farrell states that if the “vanishing” of Christian faith continues in Ireland, the problem of ageing priests and the future of leadership within the Church will not improve.<sup>167</sup>

### Religious life post-pandemic

Like most European countries, as Ireland begins to emerge from the pandemic, religious leaders and believers are assessing what has been learnt over the past two years and what the future holds for religious life post pandemic. Although some congregants have been delighted to return to in-person services,<sup>168</sup> it is too early to tell how many will eventually return.<sup>169</sup> If attendance does not pick up, Irish author Salvador Ryan suggests that the pandemic could mark “the final rupture in the history of Irish Catholicism.”<sup>170</sup>

What is clear is that the practice of religious traditions, the relationship between religious and political leaders, and the leadership of the Church have been fundamentally altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. As Archbishop Martin said, the pandemic “lifted the veil” on the position of the Church in Ireland<sup>171</sup> and has forced the country to consider its role in the future.

*Martha Scott - Cracknell*



## Italy: The pandemic as a time of conflict and solidarity

In Italy, like all over the world, COVID-19 had a strong social impact. In fact, Italy was one of the first European countries to have been badly hit by the virus. According to a study published by the organisation More in Common<sup>172</sup> conducted in 2020, Italy experienced a huge number of deaths due to the pandemic. These were aggravated by the fact that the Italian health system was not ready to respond to the crisis and nearly failed. Another aggravating factor was the large number of elderly in the country which increased the number of severe patients needing hospitalisation and the mortality rate.<sup>173</sup>

According to the study, Italy was one of the countries in Europe that suffered the most, not only health-wise but also economically. In fact, Italy's economy is strongly based on tourism, and this was almost completely shut down after the outbreak of the pandemic.<sup>174</sup>

**“Italy was one of the countries in Europe that suffered the most.”**

## Solidarity during the pandemic

At the start of the pandemic, the Italian nation showed solidarity among communities and towards doctors and nurses. People were seen singing on balconies as a sign of unity.<sup>175</sup> Yet Italy felt that the European Union did not help enough during the crisis and during Italy's most difficult days. Only after a long negotiation did Italy receive a loan and grant from the European Recovery Fund that amounted to €209 billion in total.<sup>176 177</sup>

## The pope's 'Fratelli tutti' and other acts of solidarity

Since the outburst of the pandemic, Pope Francis regularly underlined the importance of showing solidarity. In an encyclical called 'Fratelli tutti' - published by the pope in October 2020 - he emphasised that we should live as one large family and proposed concrete actions to overcome the COVID-19 health, economic, social, and political crisis. These actions included peace, dialogue, the strengthening of multilateralism, the fight against indifference, and the promotion of social inclusion.<sup>178 179</sup>

The pope also took specific actions to help the Italian people. His support of the transgender community in April 2020 is an example of his solidarity with minorities.<sup>180</sup> In addition, in March 2020, Pope Francis criticised the fact that many of the poorest people in the world are ignored by those in power and donated €100,000 to the Italian branch of the church charity, Caritas, to help the poor in the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>181</sup> In June 2020, Francis established a fund containing €1 million, dedicated to Roman citizens who were suffering from problems at work due to COVID-19. This mainly concerned daily workers, those with non-renewed contracts, and those who lost their jobs because of the coronavirus.<sup>182</sup>

## Conflicts between Church and state

Nevertheless, solidarity was not the only result of COVID-19 in Italy. The pandemic also brought political conflicts between the Catholic Church and the state caused by the decision of the government to close churches to avoid the spread of the pandemic.<sup>183 184</sup> In March 2020 for instance, Andrea Riccardi - founder of the Catholic community of Sant'Egidio - stated to be upset about the suspension of public mass. He argued that the church has always been a point of reference in times of crisis; never in the history of Italy has it happened that churches had to close. Furthermore, Riccardi claimed that people should not forget the healing power of being together to overcome this difficult situation. He finally argued that with some safety measures, masses could continue without being a cause of danger.<sup>185</sup>

In some cases, unauthorised services were held in private houses. Participants defended their disregard of the law by arguing that, while political decision-making is based solely on scientific facts, religion is supposed to be a source of spiritual healing and meaning for believers, especially in times of suffering and confusion.<sup>186</sup>

## Reopening of churches despite political pressure

In March 2020, several of Rome's Catholic churches reopened after Pope Francis voiced his displeasure with the vicar of Rome's decision to close the city's churches to comply with the Italian government's plans for containing the coronavirus. The pope stated in his Friday morning prayer that "drastic measures are not always good," and that priests ought to go out and see the sick. The vicar of Rome, Angelo De Donatis, issued a follow-up statement in which he retracted his decision and said he recognised that closing the city's churches would sow more confusion and leave more people feeling isolated.<sup>187</sup>

On the same matter, Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian Lega party, stated that for the 2020 Easter holiday, it is necessary to reopen the churches. According to Salvini, science is not enough to defeat the coronavirus pandemic; prayer is also necessary, and the protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is needed.<sup>188</sup>

In May 2020, as a result of pressure from the Church, the Italian government declared public masses could resume. A protocol signed by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Cardinal Gualtiero Bassetti, president of the Italian Bishops' Conference, outlined social distancing requirements for the reopening of the churches.<sup>189</sup>

### Islam and Ramadan restrictions

Islamic groups were also unhappy with the restrictions in Italy. In May 2020, more than 100 Muslim immigrants gathered in Rome to celebrate Ramadan together. The police did not intervene, even though social distancing rules to limit the spread of coronavirus were not respected. A few days earlier, however, the police had fined many Italians who were taking part in a demonstration and were not wearing face masks.<sup>190</sup>

### The arms industry and COVID-19

Another conflict between Catholic groups and the state was over the arms industry. Various Catholic groups in Italy have publicly questioned the Italian government regarding the continued operation of the arms industry in the middle of the coronavirus lockdown. The inquiry coincided with the feast of St. Oscar Romero of El Salvador, patron of social justice, who was shot and killed while celebrating mass. The coalition asked defence companies to follow civil and private companies in their sacrifice to combat the spread of the coronavirus and for the public to remain vigilant regarding abuses and injustices in the workforce.<sup>191</sup>

### The mafia and COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis also increased difficulties for the poor. The President of the National Anti-Usury Council of Italy, Alberto D'Urso, denounced the mafia's opportunism during the coronavirus pandemic. According to him, the mafia took advantage of the crisis by exploiting the poor and getting their assets through lending interests. D'Urso also asked the Italian government to suspend mortgage and loan payments, and for banks to not only think of profit. The pope also denounced usury in April 2020 during a Mass at his residence in the Vatican.<sup>192</sup>

### The pandemic is a time of conflict

We have seen that the pandemic in Italy has given life to many conflicts. Between Church and state, between rich and the poor, between different religions and different points of view. While gestures of solidarity were also seen, these were not enough to ease the tension. Only time will tell if Italy will emerge from these challenging times weaker or stronger.

*Ghila Amati*



## Luxembourg: Living through the pandemic in the ‘laboratory of mobility’

### Unique population profile

The population profile of Luxembourg put it in a challenging situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. With slightly over 634,000 residents and about 197,000 cross-border commuters, Luxembourg is one of the most densely populated countries in Europe.<sup>193</sup> On top of that, Luxembourg has the highest population turnover,<sup>194</sup> the second highest net migration in Europe,<sup>195</sup> and nearly half of the country’s residents do not have a Luxembourgish nationality.<sup>196</sup>

### Compared to other countries, Luxembourg placed middle in terms of public health

The dynamic character of the Luxembourgish society and its attempt to be a ‘laboratory of mobility’<sup>197</sup> made it difficult to impose any significant restrictions during the pandemic. Two full lockdowns were required to keep the population from moving around.<sup>198</sup> At the same time, the recommendation to work from home was much easier to implement in a country where services constitute the predominant sector of GDP.<sup>199</sup> That might be one of the reasons why Luxembourg is positioned in the middle in terms of infections per capita,<sup>200</sup> and a little better in terms of the excess deaths globally.<sup>201</sup>



## In terms of trust and economy, it was among the top

While from a public health perspective Luxembourg achieved neither spectacular success, nor significant failure, it can boast one of the lowest rates in Europe of people reporting difficulties in making ends meet and among the highest trusts in the national government.<sup>202</sup> While the former might not be a surprise in a country with the highest GDP per capita in Europe,<sup>203</sup> the latter is quite a success.

## The tensions run high around restrictions

In other social statistics, however, Luxembourg does not shine so bright. One of the most significant challenges encountered by the state during the pandemic were the anti-restriction and anti-vaccination protesters. With about a quarter of the population either very or rather unlikely to take the vaccine, Luxembourg did not top vaccine hesitancy charts in Europe.<sup>204</sup> However, it experienced violent protests against COVID-related restrictions and vaccine mandates.<sup>205</sup> At some point protesters began to target individual politicians,<sup>206 207</sup> and chanted death threats towards the prime minister.<sup>208</sup> The tensions ran high during the parliamentary debates too. When a man petitioning against the CovidCheck system in public buildings compared the system to Nazi regime measures, the Luxembourgish lawmakers left the building.<sup>209</sup>

**Luxembourg did not top vaccine hesitancy charts in Europe.**

## Between the state and religious communities

Although most religious communities agreed that restrictions were necessary,<sup>210</sup> they also had some words of critique towards their form. For example, the Archbishop of Luxembourg, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, criticised the government for being too blunt in imposing restrictions. Hollerich argued that churches were some of the safest places during the pandemic, both physically and mentally, provided that all safety measures were applied, as shown by scientific studies. Hollerich criticised the one-size-for-all approach of many European governments which closed all temples regardless of the type of worship in them.<sup>211</sup> In his view, the closure of the churches accelerated the secularisation of Europe by 10 years.<sup>212</sup>

But Hollerich also noted that the pandemic paved the way for interfaith collaboration. As he pointed out, when masses were banned in Luxembourg, the Catholic Church was first to introduce a sanitary plan for religious gatherings. Hollerich stated that Muslim and Jewish communities expressed gratitude for taking the lead, and used the plan as the basis for their own adaptations.<sup>213</sup>

## Society in constant flux

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the social change in Luxembourg. As a 'laboratory of mobility', its society is in a constant flux. In some respects, its government maintained high trust among the residents. It also maintained a high degree of personal freedom, not imposing vaccination mandates in the end. Nonetheless, the protests against the restrictions were more severe and violent than expected, turning the public debate into the direction that warranted an immediate end of conversation. These (for now) sporadic incidents may constitute a foundation for increased polarisation in the future.

*Ryszard Bobrowicz*

## The Netherlands: Freedom and moral duty in times of COVID-19

### Religious freedom in times of COVID-19

Since the beginning of the pandemic over two years ago, religious communities in the Netherlands have been granted a special status regarding the measures against COVID-19. Christianity being the most common religion in the Netherlands, the unique position of Christian churches especially has been a recurring theme in the Dutch news.<sup>214</sup> Whereas the government decided what restrictions applied to theatres, universities, and the like, churches received different advice from the CIO. The CIO, an umbrella organisation of churches in the Netherlands, was able to interpret the measures independently from the government.<sup>215</sup> The prohibition of gathering that applied to virtually all other aspects of society did not apply to churches and other religious communities. Still, churches were expected to keep physical services limited and to adhere to certain safety rules.<sup>216</sup>

This special treatment of churches is based on their religious character. Over the past two years, religious communities were exempted from the general government restrictions on account of the constitutional right to religious freedom. This right is grounded in the separation of Church and State. According to this principle, the State is not to meddle in religious affairs.<sup>217</sup> For this reason, churches and other religious communities were granted special liberties with respect to COVID-19 restrictions.



**Religious communities were exempted from the general government restrictions on account of the constitutional right to religious freedom.**

#### **The impact of COVID-19**

Despite the special freedoms that churches enjoyed, most religious communities in the Netherlands saw a significant decline in attendance. For example, the Dutch organisation 'Action Church Balance' found that only 29% of church members had attended a physical service in the past year, even though most Christians missed the physical gatherings they attended before the pandemic. This finding was remarkably consistent for all denominations, including Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelicals.<sup>218</sup> A study by I&O Research also found that Catholics felt less connected to ecclesiastical institutions than to other organisations, such as sports clubs or political parties. Roughly 25% of Dutch Catholics said they expected to attend church services much less or not at all once the COVID-19 measures were relaxed.<sup>219</sup> The Reformed Church has likewise raised their concerns about the psychological damage created by the COVID-19 measures. Church members were losing their sense of engagement, even though this engagement was strongly missed.<sup>220</sup>

This increase in fear and loneliness was seen worldwide. The incidence of anxiety disorders and depression has more than doubled in most

countries around the world during the pandemic, says Prof. John Ioannidis, the most cited epidemiologist in the world. He adds that most of this effect was produced by the restrictive measures, such as lockdowns, which strongly increased social isolation, educational deficits, and financial insecurity.<sup>221</sup>

#### **Freedom vs moral duty**

The fact that so few believers attended physical gatherings at their churches can partly be explained by a fear of infection, but there are also moral considerations at play. The special position of churches during the pandemic brought with it a conflict of values. Some communities interpreted the restrictions as an assault on their religious freedom, while others saw them as a moral duty, and therefore as an expression of their religious values.<sup>222 223</sup>

Based on the value of religious freedom, religious communities were granted special liberties in relation to the restrictive measures.<sup>224</sup> This partly has to do with people's sense of what religion is for. Heiner Bielefeldt - professor in human rights and former UN special rapporteur for religious freedom - argues that the freedom to practice one's religion, including its communal ceremonies, is most important when there is a



**The special position of churches during the pandemic brought with it a conflict of values.**

crisis. After all, the freedom of religion was designed in difficult times, and was meant to be upheld during crises. To restrict religious freedom in an emergency should therefore always remain an exception, rather than a rule, Bielefeldt says.<sup>225</sup>

On the flip side of religious freedom, we find an appeal to moral duty and responsibility. The exceptional liberties of churches and other religious communities came with a moral duty: to handle these liberties responsibly.<sup>226</sup> In fact, many regarded the restrictive measures and mandates, such as vaccination and mask-wearing, as a religious duty to one’s neighbour. Pope Francis famously said that taking a COVID-19 vaccine was a “moral obligation” and an “act of love.”<sup>227</sup> He also said that anti-mask protesters were “incapable of moving outside of their own little world of interests,” thereby implying that not wearing a mask is selfish.<sup>228</sup> Some Dutch communities have adopted a similar view.<sup>229</sup>

Hence, the special position of religion in times of COVID-19 exposed a tension between two important values: religious freedom and moral duty towards others. Because religious communities were granted special freedoms, they were especially aware of their own responsibility in this crisis.

*Zonne Dijkstra & Timo Pieters*

**Personal Experience**



***Timo Pieters***

“The social impact of COVID-19 that I experienced had more to do with the measures than with the virus itself. Several people I know experienced significant psychological distress from the polarisation and social isolation. Also, a rift emerged between family members due to differences of interpretation. The fear and polarisation were felt throughout the Netherlands, and were difficult to break through, despite repeated attempts at empathetic, open-minded dialogue. COVID-19 was also a pandemic of conflict.”

## Poland: The war of Poles against Poles

### Ravaged by the pandemic

With one of the highest excess deaths rates globally,<sup>230</sup> significantly understaffed and underfunded healthcare,<sup>231</sup> and deep political divisions, Poland has been ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the accompanying high inflation, the problematic housing market, doubts around the presidential elections, and two refugee crises, Polish society has been significantly reshaped. The problems grew to such an extent that they have been dubbed the 'Polish-Polish War' (*Wojna polsko-polska*).<sup>232</sup>

### Pandemic only worsened already deep political divisions

The pandemic's beginning marked the fifth year in government for the coalition of right-wing parties under the leadership of the Law and Justice party. Already at that time, polarisation of Polish society was steadily increasing.<sup>233 234</sup>

The development of the pandemic only worsened political problems. The controversial presidential elections in June 2020 were won by Andrzej Duda, the Law and Justice party candidate, by a thin margin, leaving many uncertain about their validity.<sup>235 236 237</sup> The Constitutional Tribunal's ruling restricting abortion resulted in mass protests, despite significant numbers of new infections.<sup>238 239</sup> The return of Donald Tusk, polarising leader of the largest opposition party, to national politics



from his post as the President of the European Council reinvigorated his rivalry with Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of the Law and Justice party.

<sup>240 241 242</sup>

Both coalition partners of the Law and Justice party became increasingly critical toward the biggest party and the government led by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. When the coalition's internal struggle led to a hostile takeover from within the more moderate coalition partner, the government was left without a secure majority, and the remaining parties veered to the right. The multiple controversies in handling the pandemic during 2020 further impaired public support for the government.<sup>243</sup>

### **Vaccine hesitancy, misinformation, and the fight over restrictions**

The economic inequalities further strengthened political polarisation,<sup>244</sup> as well as significant political divisions between generations<sup>245</sup> and genders.<sup>246</sup> These political divisions led to the lowest levels of trust in a national government in Europe.<sup>247</sup> Because media were viewed as party-aligned, social media became the primary source of information for 75% of society, according to the study conducted by the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities.<sup>248</sup>

The mistrust in the government led to high levels of vaccine hesitancy,<sup>249</sup> and the emergence of groups contesting the impact of pandemic-related restrictions on their work and life, from healthcare workers,<sup>250</sup> teachers and students,<sup>251</sup> to business owners.<sup>252</sup> The mistrust towards the media and official state channels led to numerous conspiracy theories spreading widely.<sup>253</sup> The growing group of pandemic disbelievers was supported by the Confederation Liberty and Independence, a fringe coalition of right-wing parties which lost its Facebook page mid-pandemic for misinformation and hate speech.<sup>254</sup>

 **The mistrust in the government led to high levels of vaccine hesitancy.**

### **The complex picture of religion**

Religion complexified the picture further. The government was for a long time hesitant to close churches for fear of their electorate.<sup>255</sup> When it finally did, there seemed to be a degree of consensus about the restrictions, with Catholic bishops offering dispensation from the Sunday Mass participation.<sup>256</sup> However, over time the question of whether to keep churches open became one of the main battlefields of the pandemic. The lines of division were not clear, with some bishops, priests, and laypeople advocating for significant restrictions, and others disagreeing, actively disobeying them, or even spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories.<sup>257 258 259</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic also functioned as a catalyst for leaving religious practice behind. While the Roman Catholic affiliation remained at a high level (87.4% in August 2021), the decrease in levels of religious practice accelerated from May 2020 onwards. The most significant drop has been observed among people aged 18-34, which might have also been an expression of the deep polarisation mentioned earlier.<sup>260</sup>

## No end in sight

While there are glimpses of hope that the pandemic might soon be a thing of the past, the same is not true for polarisation in Poland. Significantly divided, Polish society is heading towards even greater cleavages. Even Russia's invasion of Ukraine did not help to mend the social ties. The short-lived unification broke as soon as the government tried to force regulations relieving government officials from responsibility for criminal actions in handling the growing refugee crisis.<sup>261</sup>

The Catholic Church does not seem to be in a position to influence the situation either. On the one hand, it is viewed by those opposing the government as too politically aligned with the ruling coalition. On the other hand, during the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border, the voice of the episcopate's calls for humanitarian treatment of refugees did not have a significant influence on the government's action.<sup>262</sup> Ultimately, this polarisation has no end in sight.

***Ryszard Bobrowicz***



## **Serbia: Does the vaccine make you an infidel or a responsible citizen?**

### **The initial fear of an unknown enemy**

When the coronavirus appeared in Serbia, the president said that “Serbia is fighting against an invisible enemy.”<sup>263</sup> Like most other European countries, Serbia has taken strict isolation measures as the main weapon in the fight against the new virus.<sup>264</sup> These measures meant that schools, universities, and kindergartens were closed, and all sports activities cancelled.<sup>265</sup> Initially, people over the age of 65 were completely banned from leaving their homes and yards.<sup>266</sup> However, Serbia faced great challenges in fighting the virus, since legal provisions are not greatly respected.<sup>267</sup>

“**Serbia faced great challenges in fighting the virus, since legal provisions are not greatly respected.**”

## Diaspora and Easter

The first big test for the anti-pandemic measures introduced by the state was the celebration of Easter in 2020. Many Serbians live outside of Serbia, and come to the country during Christmas and Easter. This posed a challenge to the battle against COVID-19, since Serbians were afraid that large numbers of contacts during these celebrations would further spread the virus. Therefore, President Aleksandar Vucic decided to appeal to its diaspora not to come during Easter.<sup>268</sup> In addition, a measure was passed that stated that Serbian citizens from a number of other countries had to quarantine upon their entry. With many people violating these rules, President Vucic stated that punishments could include up to 3 years in prison.<sup>269 270</sup>

Although the state prescribed strict measures, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was informally exempted from some of them. This can be seen by the fact that the SOC did not give official instructions on coronavirus restrictions in churches, posted the list of churches on its website where Easter Liturgies would be served, and continued to give communion to all believers with the same spoon.<sup>271</sup>

Another state decision was to impose a curfew during Easter, which meant that believers could not visit churches.<sup>272</sup> This caused polarisation in society. Some believers sent a request to the Synod to insist on allowing believers to at least attend the Easter Liturgy. This was rejected by the state.<sup>273</sup> The SOC then advised believers to celebrate Easter at home.<sup>274</sup> Contrary to the SOC's decision, some priests, including Bishop Nikanor Bogunovic, invited the faithful to come to the Liturgy and receive communion.<sup>275</sup>

## How to choose the best vaccine

By February 2021, Serbia bought vaccines from several countries, allowing citizens to choose between four: Pfizer-BioNTech, Sputnik V (Gamaleja Research Center), Sinopharm, and Oxford / AstraZeneca.<sup>276</sup> <sup>277</sup> Based on survey results, two-thirds of the respondents believed that the Chinese and Russian vaccines are more reliable than the vaccines from the West.<sup>278</sup>

The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Serbia, Stanislav Hočevar, advised against receiving vaccines that were produced using embryonic cells.<sup>279</sup> The SOC's noncompliance with anti-pandemic measures, as well as its advice to receive only certain vaccines, posed moral problems to Serbian citizens. Society was divided over the question of vaccines.

## Communion with the same spoon or not?

Vaccination was not the only dilemma for SOC believers. The SOC is the largest religious community in Serbia, and it is customary for everyone to receive communion with the same spoon. This caused great concern during the COVID-19 pandemic and has been interpreted as endangering public health. The Patriarch of the SOC, Porfirije Perić, called on believers to respect all health measures, but the practice of communion did not change.<sup>280</sup> As a result, the SOC was criticised in the media because it insisted on having communion with the same spoon.<sup>281</sup>

Some SOC employees stated that they were scared because of the church's insistence on the common spoon. Because of their doubts, they were characterised as 'unbelievers'.<sup>282</sup> This debate led to a division among the believers into those who supported communion with the same spoon and those who were against it.<sup>283</sup>

SOC as a strong polarising social factor

As demonstrated throughout the pandemic, the SOC is a very powerful force in Serbian society - sometimes even stronger than the state. In fact, its recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic regularly opposed state restrictions. The SOC never limited the number of believers in churches, which was done in most European countries.<sup>284 285</sup> In addition, the SOC did not ask believers to wear masks during church services, and the practice of communion of all believers and clergy with the same spoon remained unchanged.<sup>286</sup>

Thus, this imbalance between the state and the SOC, with opposing rules and recommendations, led to great polarisation in Serbia. It remains to be seen if this polarisation will fade away with the pandemic.

Marko Pavlović

Personal Experience



Marko Pavlović

“COVID-19 has primarily changed the way of celebrating important dates and holidays in Serbia. I was the best man at my friend’s wedding during the pandemic, where only 5 people were allowed to be present at the ceremony. Before the pandemic, about 100 guests would have been present. Being there with the 5 of us was a special experience, with silence, euphoria and applause. That atmosphere of restrictive measures has led us to wonder how much the presence of our family, friends and colleagues means to us, and if can we truly celebrate those holidays without them.”





## Spain: COVID pushes religious groups towards a changing social role

In March 2020, as cases of coronavirus began to surge in Europe for the first time, Spain quickly joined Italy as one of the countries suffering the highest rates of mortality. In response, the government introduced some of the tightest restrictions in Europe, preventing residents from leaving their homes other than to buy food or seek medical attention.<sup>287</sup>

For religious institutions in Spain, most widely the Catholic Church, but also minority faiths such as Islam, Judaism, and other Christian denominations, these restrictions challenged a core feature of their practice - congregating in groups and working in the community. With this type of work now banned, it was necessary to change the traditions and practices of religious groups to adapt to this 'new normality'.

As the restrictions have been lifted, or reimposed, over the last two years, religious institutions and their followers in Spain have experienced both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, restrictions on gatherings have limited traditional practices and roles of religious institutions and their followings. Yet on the other hand, the social exclusion created by the pandemic has meant that religious groups have assumed an important role in providing support to vulnerable groups.

### An unexpected break from traditions

As the coronavirus began to spread in East Asia during the early months of 2020, one particular case caused great concern for the church. A

woman in South Korea attended a church service shortly after returning from China. 'Patient 31', as she was referred to, ended up infecting around 1,000 congregants.<sup>288</sup> This widely publicised story would turn out to be a cautionary tale for the future of the Catholic Church in Spain over the next two years.

Although the number of Catholics in Spain has fallen steadily since the 1980s, the practice of mass and various annual traditions have continued to be an important part of the country's cultural identity.<sup>289</sup> However, since COVID-19 has spread, the Catholic Church's place in the social calendar of Spaniards has been even further limited.

During the first wave of the virus, church doors were closed, and even when they reopened, they were subject to limits on capacity, compulsory mask wearing, and social distancing measures. As well as this, many traditions which maintain the Church's place in the calendar of an increasingly secular Spain have had to be cancelled for two years, such as the famous processions that mark Easter.<sup>290</sup>

**Social exclusion created by the pandemic has meant that religious groups have assumed an important role in providing support to vulnerable groups.**

Another challenge that the Catholic Church has faced in Spain due to the coronavirus has been questions regarding its value during a health crisis. In September 2020, the President of the Community of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, of the conservative Popular Party, faced widespread criticism for her failure to employ enough people to work on tracking the virus. A particular aspect of criticism was the fact that the Community had extended the contract of 73 priests to attend those suffering from COVID in the hospital. This decision to pay one million euros to the Church for the priests' services came at the same time that there were cuts to the contracts of people tracing and tracking cases of the virus.<sup>291</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this decision led to criticisms from opposition parties and the media.<sup>292</sup> But more significantly for the Church, it highlighted how in a time of health crisis, the spiritual role of faith was considered by many to be of less value than the practical role of those working to prevent the virus's spread.

### **The needs of the many**

Yet, although there have been clear challenges to the Church's status caused by coronavirus, the pandemic has also served to underline the role that the Church can play in supporting the most vulnerable in society.

Since early 2020, throughout the Spanish Catholic clergy there has been regular reference to the need to provide support to the most vulnerable groups in society, particularly those in poverty, to protect them from the consequences of the pandemic. Much of this has been focused on the work of Caritas, the Catholic Church's charity, which has regularly warned of the increased risks that those in poverty have faced due to the economic instability resulting from the pandemic. During the first wave of the virus, donations to Caritas food banks in Madrid increased by 94% in response to a tripling of the demand for such services.<sup>293</sup>

However, it has not only been Caritas who have highlighted the need to support those in poverty. Since the start of COVID, the Madrid-based Catholic charity ‘Messengers of Peace’ has received media attention for their different schemes and ideas for providing support to vulnerable groups.<sup>294</sup>

As well as providing a regular food bank and outreach to homeless people in Madrid, the leader of the charity, Father Angel, has also tried to draw attention to the danger of social isolation as a result of COVID. In particular, Angel has warned of the loneliness that many elderly people have faced due to fears of spreading or catching the virus. In December 2021, he even called for the Spanish government to launch a new ‘Ministry of Isolation’, like that which already exists in Japan and the UK, in order to combat the problem.<sup>295</sup>

In this sense, although the Church has been forced to adapt its traditional means of worship and celebration, the pandemic has created circumstances in which its role in providing social support has been of great importance.

**Recognition of a multi-faith Spain**

Yet it is important to remember that the Catholic Church is not the only religion that has been affected by the coronavirus in Spain.

During the first wave of the crisis, Muslims across Europe were faced with a tragic problem - a lack of Islamic burial spaces in local cemeteries.<sup>296</sup> Although this caused great pain for many Muslim families in Spain, whose relatives in some cases had to be buried many hundreds of kilometres away from their homes, it has also created a greater awareness about the need to build more burial spaces for this community.<sup>297</sup> The Islamic Commission of Spain released a report in December 2020 in which they described how the problem of a lack of burial space had been “greatly

aggravated” by the pandemic, and called for action to resolve it.<sup>298</sup> In response, numerous municipalities have begun schemes to increase their number of Islamic burial spots, for example in Catalonia, where 256 new plots were created in October 2021, or in Vitoria, where the city’s first-ever Islamic burials were held in January 2022.<sup>299 300</sup>

**Looking forwards**

The coronavirus pandemic has provided many lessons for the changing religious landscape in the Spain of 2022. Whilst traditional practices and festivals have been put on hold, religious groups have expanded their role as a voice of vulnerable groups or as representatives of their communities. It is yet to be seen whether this unpredicted shift in emphasis will remain as the pandemic recedes.

***Freddie Scott***

**Personal Experience**



***Freddie Scott***

“Having grown up in the UK and first moved to Spain in 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has served to underline to me many of the cultural differences between the two nations. Whilst in the UK a significant portion of citizens refused to wear masks, even in enclosed spaces like public transport, adherence to mask-wearing in Spain has been incredibly high. This has included wearing them outdoors, often in hot weather, as well as inside. It’s hard to say exactly what is the cause of this but I personally have no doubt that the sense of community and obligation to those who surround you has been a factor. In this sense, the pandemic has led me to have even greater respect for Spanish people and their values than I did before.”



## Sweden: Recommendations first, restrictions last

### A unique approach to the pandemic

Sweden has been known worldwide for its unique approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. While most countries in the world operated with severe governmental restrictions, Sweden retained a high degree of individual freedom. The Swedish government doubled down on its approach which could be summed up as ‘recommendations first, restrictions last’. Although restrictions eventually tightened, they were still much more lenient than in many other countries.

### Controversial from the start

The Swedish approach proved controversial from the start. In some ways, it had fatal consequences. The so-called *Coronakommissionen*, leading an investigation into Sweden’s response to the pandemic, criticised (among others): too lenient regulations; the initial response to the pandemic that led to high mortality among the vulnerable groups; a focus on the middle class; and a lack of mental preparedness among decision-makers. At the same time, it welcomed the fact that, in the end, Sweden had one of the lowest mortalities in the world.<sup>301</sup>

### Low insecurity, high trust

But reliance on personal responsibility had significantly positive effects too. The lack of restricted measures made the impact on the Swedish economy lower. It also created a sense of trust in the relationship between

the state and individuals. A study showed that Swedish residents suffered one of the lowest rates of job loss and difficulty making ends meet in the world. Sweden also has the fourth-highest level of trust in a national government, despite a drastic decrease in trust across Europe.<sup>302</sup>

### **Neither vaccination nor polarisation is a significant problem in Sweden**

This might be among the reasons why Sweden did not have significant problems with vaccine hesitancy, with over twice as many doses administered than its entire population at the time of writing.<sup>303</sup> The pandemic seemed to have no significant impact on polarisation in the parliament, in media, or among the citizens.<sup>304 305</sup>

### **“A shadow pandemic”**

Nonetheless, the pandemic had a considerable impact on Swedish society in other aspects. In line with other countries, Sweden experienced the so-called ‘shadow pandemic’, with a substantial increase in domestic violence.<sup>306</sup> The initially high death toll among vulnerable groups led to their subsequent isolation, including significant restrictions in visiting rights in elderly care facilities and hospitals.<sup>307</sup> Mental health problems increased significantly too, with a rise in people suffering from anxiety and depression.<sup>308</sup>

### **Religious communities experienced a loss of revenue and an increase in creativity**

While the general population fared relatively well economically during the pandemic, religious communities were more significantly affected. The limitation in physical participation in religious gatherings on the one

hand, and the decrease of tax-related income in a depressed economy on the other, led to the worsening financial situation. This may lead to religious communities being limited to a smaller range of activities in the future.<sup>309</sup>

Nonetheless, during the pandemic, religious communities remained active in many ways. In the yearbook of the Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities, the representatives of different Swedish religious communities described the explosion of creativity among their members. As many pointed out, while their religious meetings moved online, this could not replicate the social aspects of physical participation. Nor did it help with anxiety and other mental health issues. Thus, a range of other activities arose in that place.<sup>310</sup> For example, the Jewish community of Stockholm ensured continuous support for Holocaust Survivors over WhatsApp, while the priests from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church called all of their members to offer support.<sup>311</sup>

**While their religious meetings moved online, this could not replicate the social aspects of physical participation.**



**Continuation, not disruption, characterised  
Sweden during the pandemic**

Sweden’s unique approach remains controversial to this day. Nonetheless, while a significant upheaval, the pandemic does not seem to have significantly reshaped Sweden socially. The initial response to the pandemic could have been significantly better, but focusing on recommendations rather than restrictions allowed Sweden to soften the impact of some of the social problems that severely affected countries with a more restrictive approach. Rooted in the country’s long-standing relationship between its citizens and the state, it could not be simply used as a model for other countries with a significantly different social culture.

*Ryszard Bobrowicz*

**Personal Experience**



*Ryszard Bobrowicz*

“Living in the Swedish countryside, I did not experience too many restrictions in the generally lenient Sweden. The low population density meant that the local shops were much less busy than in many other places in Europe, providing a safer environment for day-to-day activities. But it also meant a high level of isolation, which was intensified by the generally individual character of academic research in theology.”

## United Kingdom: The same pandemic but unequal impacts

Reflecting on the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the UK, we are met with an uneven picture. Different people were affected differently. One key outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic was that it threw the UK's socio-economic inequalities into sharp relief. Significantly, religion was often a factor in these advantages and disadvantages.<sup>312</sup>

Another important consequence was the remobilisation of religion in the UK's personal and public spaces. During the pandemic, churches and Christian charities played a prominent role in addressing the UK's socio-economic inequalities.<sup>313</sup> Religions also tried to adapt to restrictions on social interaction with a digital transformation of their practices.<sup>314</sup>

### Inequalities made visible

In the UK, socio-economic inequalities often determined how one was affected by COVID-19. For example, more black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) health workers died during the pandemic than any other ethnic group.<sup>315</sup> Already socially disadvantaged, BAME people in particular were more vulnerable to the health shocks of COVID-19.<sup>316</sup> A religious minority within BAME communities was also particularly affected: Muslims. Muslim frontline health workers were some of the first to die in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>317</sup> They were also found to die more often.<sup>318</sup>

Another group of people unequally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK were children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, food poverty hit Europe most visibly in the UK. With the government refusing to provide

free school meals to children after summer breaks,<sup>319</sup> fears peaked over whether children would go hungry during the winter. Manchester United and England forward Marcus Rashford, who had been celebrated in the 2020 Birthday Honours for his efforts against food poverty,<sup>320</sup> continued national efforts to secure free meals for vulnerable children during the pandemic.<sup>321</sup>

### Religion plays a public role

One of Rashford's key allies in the support for free meals for children were the country's local churches and Christian charities. The Archbishop of Canterbury announced: "Our schools and parishes are stepping in to help disadvantaged children across England. Churches across England will be providing free meals to children during the half-term holiday."<sup>322</sup> This call-to-action saw local churches hang packets of crisps across their pews and gather contributions for the cause<sup>323</sup> or open at noon every day during half-term to give food out to families needing support.

Church leaders and Christian charities also put pressure on the government to take long-term action against food poverty affecting children. The Bishop of Durham, the Rt Revd Paul Butler, described it as a "longer-term and deeper problem"<sup>324</sup> for which the real solution was twofold. Firstly, the "heart-warming and encouraging" rallying of churches, businesses, charities, and individuals to support disadvantaged children. And secondly, active advocacy for significant "long-term government action," not simply emergency action.<sup>325</sup>

Arguably, the efforts to reform government policy on food poverty highlighted how COVID-19 spurred UK religions on to new frontiers of action. While churches and Christian charities – such as the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church, and Church Action on Poverty – had previously led independent efforts to address the growing food poverty crisis,<sup>326</sup> the more organised and

unified involvement of churches and Christian charities in the Rashford case only confirmed this emerging role of religion in British public life.

Jonathan Benthall, author of *Returning to Religion: Why a Secular Age is Haunted*, has argued that religion is reclaiming public roles as western liberal societies involve religion more and more in humanitarianism, environmentalism, and animal rights.<sup>327</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic particularly escalated this in the UK.

### A more digital religion

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic also saw 'God' gaining new ground on the digital frontier. During the early stages of the pandemic, for example, Google searches for 'God' not only increased globally, but were also the highest they had ever been.<sup>328</sup> Professor Jeanet Sinding Bentzen of the University of Copenhagen explained why this was happening: "In times of crisis, humans tend to turn to religion for comfort and explanation. The theory is called religious coping and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic is no exception."<sup>329</sup> She found that the rise was highest for Christians, followed by Muslims.<sup>330</sup>

**The efforts to reform government policy on food poverty highlighted how COVID-19 spurred UK religions on to new frontiers of action.**

This was particularly true of the UK. Free from restrictions of work, place, and time, people from religious communities changed how, when, and where they reached out to God. For one, there was a significant boom in online prayer. Only a month into the lockdown in the UK, the Church of England saw 10,000 people install its 'Time to Pray' app. Reverend Kate Harford, a university chaplain and priest within the Metropolitan Community Churches, reflected on such developments: "People's relationship with their concept of God is changing."<sup>331</sup>

In addition to the rise in 'app faith'<sup>332</sup> across the country, the UK also saw the rise of virtual religious communities. Muslims in the UK ran virtual iftars while rabbis and vicars routinely officiated at live-streamed services such as sermons and even funerals.<sup>333</sup> This move to new digital communal experiences led to an increase in attendance at worship services during the pandemic in the UK. For instance, the Anglican Palm Sunday mass at Plymouth Cathedral, which usually drew 650 worshippers, attracted 2,200 people to their online service. Similarly, mosques in Luton reported that they have been able to reach more young people than ever before due to the increasing use of online platforms.<sup>334</sup>

“Whether through charity or prayer, religious actors and institutions saw the pandemic as a moral calling and acted.

Unequal impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic in the UK negatively impacted BAME communities and children. This picture is of course illustrative of wider social inequalities. For example, while the first year of economic turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic pushed almost 700,000 people in the country below the poverty line, including 120,000 children,<sup>335</sup> the crisis also created a record number of billionaires.<sup>336</sup> 24 people became billionaires in the UK during the pandemic, taking the total to 171.<sup>337</sup>

While religious communities suffered from these shocks, they also played a role in alleviating them. Whether through charity or prayer, religious actors and institutions saw the pandemic as a moral calling and acted. This was arguably because they understood the pandemic not only as a surge in material challenges, but also a case of profound moral injury,<sup>338</sup> where man-made actions - economic, political, and social - violated religious principles of right and wrong. These injuries were not only uneven and sharp, but as the recent 'Partygate' scandal reminds us,<sup>339</sup> are likely to continue well past the pandemic itself.

Muhammad Faisal Khalil

Personal experience



Martha Scott-Cracknell

"Personally, I feel that one of the main social impacts of COVID-19 in the UK was the breakdown of the small experiences of connectivity and community. After a few weeks of staying at home, beyond missing my friends and family, I started to begin missing the small, social interactions I would have on a daily basis. Going to the supermarket, getting a bus, speaking to my neighbour - all of these things that help to form a sense of community, belonging and connectivity - were gone. While thankfully these experiences are once again commonplace, I now try to not take them for granted quite so much."





## Discussion

Every European country has felt the impact of these trends upon their society, changing the way people work, socialise, live, and worship. We start by examining the social impact of COVID-19 on the 15 countries in the dossier, with a particular focus on the role religion has played in public life during the pandemic. Our analysts then discuss three trends that have characterised the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Europe. The pandemic led to:

- cooperation and sometimes conflict between governments and religions over pandemic measures;
- certain groups being scapegoated or discriminated against; and
- religions undertaking something of a digital revolution.

Finally, we turn to religion's future, and the challenges and opportunities religious communities will face in a post-COVID Europe. Two and a half years since the outbreak of the pandemic, we can see more clearly how a microscopic virus is changing the path of world history.

### Cooperation

#### *Degrees of collaboration with the government and its impact on society*

The dossier has shown that the responses to, and cooperation with, COVID-19 restrictions by religious groups and institutions varied among the different European countries. Responses to state restrictions on religious services and practices can be divided into two different trends. On the one hand, religious groups in some countries fully cooperated with government measures. On the other hand, however, religious groups and institutions in other countries strongly criticised restrictions.



### *Full cooperation*

Christian institutions in countries such as Belgium, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden strongly cooperated with government restrictions. What all these countries have in common is the moderate or low place religion assumes in their public life. In Belgium, for instance, while the government strongly limited masses and religious services during the different lockdowns, the Catholic Church remained on the government's side in the fight against the pandemic. Among Muslim populations, it emerges that Belgian Muslims - despite Muslim groups in other countries being accused of violating coronavirus measures - followed the restrictions. Moreover, in the case of Finland and the Netherlands, even though religious groups were not bound by government anti-pandemic restrictions, religious groups generally chose to align themselves with government restrictions. This suggests that governments may be wise to give religions agency in pandemic situations, allowing religions to demonstrate their own social responsibility through their pandemic response.

### *Strong criticism of restrictions or ambivalent cooperation*

Among the countries where Christians were strongly critical of restrictions were France, Ireland, Serbia, Croatia, Italy, and Poland. Jews in Belgium and Muslims in Italy showed similar attitudes. The commonality between these countries appears to be the central place of religion (both present and historical), and its power in society. It is this centrality that may have caused such strong opposition to government restrictions. Moreover, the strong need of the population for religious comfort and religious rituals might have made it more difficult for them to follow restrictions. On the other hand, also in secular France, we can find the same opposing and critical position towards government restrictions. This might be exactly because of the long-term separation between religion and state in France which may have increased tension and mistrust between the two.

Among the religious countries strongly critical of restrictions is Serbia, where the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) was practically exempted from the restrictions because of its power in the country. The SOC is so powerful in Serbia that its advice during the pandemic could almost always be in contrast with the government restrictions. In Ireland too, traditions are an essential aspect of the Irish people's cultural and religious identity. For this reason, the restrictions imposed on rituals and religious services brought a strong conflict between the government and religious Catholic institutions. In Italy, a country in which the Holy See resides, the pope claimed that "drastic measures are not always good," and that priests ought to go out and see the sick.

### **Scapegoating and discrimination**

Throughout history, pandemics have caused people to turn inwards and ponder existential questions. What kind of god creates such suffering? What have I done to provoke God's wrath? How can humans be happy knowing the true fragility of life? Great philosophical insights have been forged in the crucible of pestilence and death.

But times of widespread sickness also bring the temptation to place blame on other people. René Girard has demonstrated how 'scapegoating' other people, especially minorities or otherwise weakened individuals, has occurred throughout history. He contends that a community is strengthened when it unites around blaming a common enemy but that this unity is precarious.<sup>341</sup>

As this dossier has highlighted, scapegoating has occurred in many countries and at many levels throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Denmark, for example, the Muslim population largely followed anti-pandemic restrictions closely.<sup>342</sup> In autumn 2020, a greater proportion of mosques closed their doors than minority Christian denominations.<sup>343</sup> Muslim organisations collaborated with the Danish medical authorities

to produce a booklet citing the Quran to encourage vaccination. When some fringe Muslims described the pandemic as Allah’s punishment upon infidels, prominent Danish Muslims condemned them, questioning their interpretation of the Quran.<sup>344</sup>

Despite all this, Muslims bore a disproportionate amount of criticism in the Danish media for breaching lockdowns.<sup>345 346</sup> While there was some pushback against this negative portrayal of Denmark’s Muslims, it is difficult to calculate the damage it did to the reputation of a minority community that is already discriminated against.<sup>347</sup>

There have been many claims of scapegoating and discrimination during the pandemic, not all of them true. Were the elderly discriminated against by governments’ failure to properly invest in healthcare? Were the young victimised by overcautious approaches that denied them education and social interaction? Were manual labourers discriminated against by states whose restrictions privileged those who could work from home?

Many religious people also claimed that they were scapegoated. Government restrictions that limited gatherings were naturally felt particularly hard by groups centred around communal worship. But across Europe, believers claimed to feel discriminated against. It should not be for the government to decide whether to prioritise spiritual or physical wellbeing.

Different countries responded to this claim in different ways. In the Netherlands, religious communities have been exempted from general government restrictions due to the constitutional right to religious freedom, and the stipulation that the State cannot interfere in Church affairs.<sup>348</sup> On the other extreme, countries such as Ireland enforced restrictions that rendered nearly all religious gatherings illegal, leading to some religious leaders calling for people to break the law.<sup>349</sup>

As this section and the entire dossier have shown, the pandemic not only highlighted pre-existing inequalities, but also created new ones.

## The digitalisation of religion

From the dossier it emerges that – as a result of the strong restrictions brought about by the pandemic – religious services and rituals underwent a digital revolution in all countries. An EARS article published during the pandemic has already highlighted many interesting digital solutions that different religious groups found in response to the pandemic. The same trend also emerged from this dossier. For instance, in the UK, during a month of lockdown, 10,000 people installed the ‘Time to Pray’ app. Moreover, the Jewish community of Stockholm strongly provided social help to Holocaust Survivors over WhatsApp. Finally, priests from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Sweden organised a phone tree to ensure their members were supported throughout the pandemic. This shows that religion can adapt itself to modernity and can find ways to be relevant in a technological world. Moreover, the digitalisation of religion and the high use of technology underlines the strong need for religious communities - even if digital.

The digitalisation of religion across Europe raises a lot of questions about whether there has been a fundamental change in people’s experience of religious life. Will religion ever be the same after the pandemic? Will physical attendance at religious services bounce back or have people grown to enjoy joining from the comfort of their own couch? Will the online option help us better connect with people we would not otherwise interact with physically – because of differences in geography or economic and social backgrounds – or will this lack of human contact increase polarisation and allow the dehumanisation of the other? Will digitalisation be enough to slow or reverse the overall decrease in popularity of religion across Europe? This dossier raises these and many other questions about the social impact that COVID-19 has had and will have on our religious lives.





## Conclusion

What is in store for a post-COVID Europe? What has experiencing a pandemic done to the ways people live and think? In particular, how has the future of religion been changed by the coronavirus? The dossier allows us to sketch a few brief answers to these questions.

The future of religion will undoubtedly be more digital. If religions were generally outdated in their use of technology before the pandemic, their embracing of digital media after the outbreak of COVID was lightning fast because of their essentially communal existence. Religions' new online existences have broadened their reach and presented a host of opportunities. It is unlikely religious groups will abandon these after the pandemic. However, every benefit comes with its challenges, and the digitisation of religions is no exception. How religious groups deal with polarisation, isolation, and mental health problems often associated with the internet remains to be seen.

As religions increasingly move their existence online, theological reflection will be needed to explore how this impacts community. For many Christians, gathering together to share bread and wine is an expression of the body of Christ. The physicality of the bread and wine they consume reflects God's becoming flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, and gives Christians hope for the salvation of the physical world. At least in Christianity, 'embodiment' is associated with divinity, with 'disembodiment' usually linked to demons or immorality. What changes in this theological equation when people participate not physically but via a screen, not sharing hugs but heart emojis, not communing but computing? The same dilemma applies in different ways to all religious groups.

The pandemic also reintroduced death and disease into the collective imagination - topics that are usually spoken about only in whispers or

not at all. For a world obsessed with youth, vitality and beauty, COVID's reminder of our fragility as humans was unwelcome. As Europe emerges from the pandemic, people will be left with scars, an underlying nervousness that life will soon end.

Although people were sometimes brought together by the pandemic - videos of people singing from their balconies or clapping for doctors and nurses come to mind - polarisation was also a feature of COVID-19 times. This dossier explored how polarisation hit Poland, Finland, and France, and also covered the Serbian Orthodox Church's role in dividing Serbia. The pandemic has exposed old divisions in society and created new ones.

This presents religions with an unusual opportunity. Historically, it has been to religion that people have flocked in times of nervousness or despair. Religions give answers (albeit sometimes difficult ones) to the existential questions now being asked. What happens after I die? What is the best way to live out my short life? Will I see my mother again? What should I do with my money? What is eternal?

We are living through an unsettled period in history, but also a fascinating one. Each of us draws from our personal experience when answering how Europe has been changed by COVID-19. Yet as this dossier has shown, collective analysis of what has affected and motivated people is an urgent task in preparing for our next global crisis, for religions as much as nations.



# Footnotes

- België rondt officieel trieste kaap van 30.000 coronadoden: wie zijn ze en stierven ze dóór of mét covid? | VRT NWS
- Verbod op publieke kerkdiensten: een mens leeft van meer dan brood alleen| VRT NWS
- Van Antwerpen tot Brussel: ons land applaudisseert voor “onze helden van de zorg” | VRT NWS: nieuws
- Corona verdeelt: Wat nu? Luister ook naar kritiek op maatregelen, adviseert OCAD | VRT NWS: nieuws
- Coronacrisis heeft sterke impact op studenten: “Meer angst, stress en somberheid” | VRT NWS: nieuws
- 23 jongeren veroordeeld voor lockdownfeestjes in Antwerpen: “Egoïstisch en asociaal” | VRT NWS: nieuws
- De kerk heeft het land mee gemaakt, en wil het mee blijven maken’ | De Standaard Mobile
- De kerk heeft het land mee gemaakt, en wil het mee blijven maken’ | De Standaard Mobile
- Gezegend hij die streamt in de naam des Heren | De Standaard Mobile
- Bisschop Bonny en viroloog Van Gucht roepen op tot vaccinatie | Kerknet
- Verbod op publieke kerkdiensten: een mens leeft van meer dan brood alleen | VRT NWS
- De kerk heeft het land mee gemaakt, en wil het mee blijven maken’ | De Standaard Mobile
- Mogelijk dubbel zoveel moslims in België tegen 2050 | VRT NWS: nieuws
- ‘Uitbraak coronavirus in Haagse moskee na chenden maatregelen’ | NOS
- Elke epidemie heeft haar zondebok nodig | De Standaard Mobile
- Ook nu zijn moslims door hardnekkige geruchten weer de zondebok in India
- Ook al zit je alleen thuis, je voelt je deel van een groter geheel’ | De Standaard Mobile
- Moslimexecutieve roept moslims op om zich te houden aan de officiële communicatie | Het Nieuwsblad Mobile
- Check: Zijn de Belgische coronavaccins halal en koosjer? | VRT NWS: nieuws
- Politie legt bijeenkomst in synagoge stil: Joodse gemeenschap betwist wetsovertreding, maar is dat terecht? | VRT NWS
- Ultra-orthodoxe joden in Israël houden zich niet aan coronamaatregelen | NOS
- Raad van State veegt verbod op religieuze erediensten van tafel | De Standaard Mobile
- ‘Waarom gaat vrijheid om te shoppen voor op godsdienstvrijheid?’ | De Standaard Mobile
- Prvi slučaj koronavirusa u Hrvatskoj
- Prije točno godinu dana koronavirus je stigao u Hrvatsku i u potpunosti nam promijenio živote
- Odluka o privremenju zabrani prelaska preko graničnih prijelaza Republike Hrvatske (19. ožujak 2020)
- Zabrana kretanja ne vrijedi jednako za sve i to je ozbiljan problem
- Pandemija i Ustav Republike Hrvatske
- Je li zabrana okupljanja, kretanja i rada teretana u skladu s ustavom?
- Je li zabrana okupljanja, kretanja i rada teretana u skladu s ustavom?
- Prof. dr. Tonči Matulić: Crkva je trebala oformiti ‘Stožer za pandemiju’. Govore nestručne osobe, amateri i diletanti... To je kraj zdravog razuma. Sva su cjepiva moralno prihvatljiva!

- Dok je papa Franjo potpuno jasan kada govori o pandemiji, Crkva u Hrvatskoj zamuckuje
- Prof. dr. Tonči Matulić: Crkva je trebala oformiti ‘Stožer za pandemiju’. Govore nestručne osobe, amateri i diletanti... To je kraj zdravog razuma. Sva su cjepiva moralno prihvatljiva!
- Prof. dr. Tonči Matulić: Crkva je trebala oformiti ‘Stožer za pandemiju’. Govore nestručne osobe, amateri i diletanti... To je kraj zdravog razuma. Sva su cjepiva moralno prihvatljiva!
- Kako će se ponašati crkva tijekom pandemije korona virusa u Hrvatskoj: ‘Poštovat ćemo sve što odluči država, a misa za Uskrs će svakako biti’
- Profesorica s KBF-a: Hrvatska je totalitarna, a pandemija je planirana
- Podignite krivične prijave protiv pristalica hrvatskog sveštenika
- Crkva i Sabor pripremaju najmasovnije kršenje mjera do sada
- Crkva je gotovo godinu dana šutjela o cjepivu i covid potvrdama, a onda je izvela kopernikanski obrat: U samo mjesec dana od protivnika prisile do poslušnih pastira u Banskim dvorima
- Papa: Vakcinacija je čin ljubavi
- U Vatikanu bez Covid potvrde nema plaće, a u Hrvatskoj svećenici šute o cjepljenju: ‘Svatko ima svoje razloge...’
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- Oxfordsko, rusko i kinesko cjepivo katolicima nisu etički prihvatljiva...’ No, postoji jedan ali...
- Danish Muslims during COVID- 19 | Tidsskrift for Islamforskning
- COVID-19 og religion | Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift
- Et globalt perspektiv: Hvad har vi lært om religioner og pandemi?
- COVID-19 og religion | Religionsvidenskabeligt Tidsskrift
- Danskerne har fundet et nyt ord for deres tro | Kristeligt Dagblad | Begrebet kulturkristen fylder stadig mere i danskernes bevidsthed, viser opgørelse. Tidligere blev kulturkristendom brugt som skældsord, men i dag er det positivt for mange
- Religionskritik: Religion og tro under pres fra COVID-19
- Religionskritik: Religion og tro under pres fra COVID-19
- Pandemiens konsekvenser
- Coronavirus sætter verdens religioner under pres
- Coronavirus sætter verdens religioner under pres
- Religionskritik: Religion og tro under pres fra COVID-19
- Kan man ifølge islam hævde, at corona er Allahs straf? - Religion.dk
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- Stigende smitte rammer minoriteter hårdt: Nu advarer ekspert forud for muslimsk fejring

- Minister i bøn til muslimer: Pas på - ramadanen må ikke betyde smitteeksplosion
- Debat: Medier og myndigheder bør ikke udstille det somaliske mindretal midt i en global pandemi
- »Er vaccinerne halal?«: Heunicke erkender, at vaccinepjecer med Koran-henvisninger var en fejl - politiken.dk
- Er vacciner halal? Sundhedsstyrelsen kritiseres for at begrunde vacciner med henvisning til koranen | Kristeligt Dagblad
- Hvis flere minoritetsdanskere skal vaccineres, må Heunicke pakke islamforskrækkelsen væk | Information
- Danish Muslims during COVID- 19 | Tidsskrift for Islamforskning
- Debat: Medier og myndigheder bør ikke udstille det somaliske mindretal midt i en global pandemi
- Nåin korona iski suomalaisten hyvinvointiin: erityisesti pääkaupunkiseutu kovilla, kertoo THL:n kysely – katso oman maakuntasi tulokset.
- Koronaepidemiaan vaikutukset hyvinvointiin, palveluihin ja talouteen.
- Sosiaalibarometri 2020.
- Nåin korona iski suomalaisten hyvinvointiin: erityisesti pääkaupunkiseutu kovilla, kertoo THL:n kysely – katso oman maakuntasi tulokset.
- Koronaepidemiaan vaikutukset hyvinvointiin, palveluihin ja talouteen.
- Suomalaisparit rynnivät nyt terapiaan – vastaanotolla toistuu ”kamala klisee”, asiantuntija sanoo ja kertoo, kuinka sen voi välttää.
- Professori: Tehohoidon kuormitus on jo niin hälyttävällä tasolla, että henkilökunta voi joutua harkitsemaan joululomiensa siirtoa.
- 75.Vainajien kylmäsäilytystilat sairaaloissa täyttyvät, koska monet lykkäävät hautajaisten järjestämistä.
- Luottamus asiantuntijoihin vahvaa koronaviruksessa, mutta epäilijöitäkin löytyi.
- Ibid.
- Rokotevastaisuus näkyy nyt sairaaloissa myös lääkewastaisuutena – osa kuitenkin katuu rokotteen ottamatta jättämisistä.
- Meitä ette rokota.
- Nuoret ääriiliikkeiden rekrytoinnin kohteena.
- ”Rokotetut eivät voi olla rokottamattomien panttivankina”, sanoo THL:n Hanna Nohynek – tämä tiedetään heistä, joita ei ole rokotettu.
- Koronarokotus repii rikki jo parisuhteita ja perheitä: ”Tämä selkeästi jakaa mieliteitä kaikissa ihmis suhteissa”.
- Meitä ette rokota.
- Useita uskontoja Suomessa edustava järjestö: Uskonnolliset yhteisöt kannustavat koronarokotuksen ottamiseen.
- Piispa Teemu Laajasalon mielipidekirjoitus rokotuksista aiheutti eropiikin kirkosta.
- Miksi jotkut uskonnolliset yhteisöt kokoontuvat, kun muut noudattavat tiukkoja rajoituksia? Kolmen kirkon edustajat kertovat, miten ne ehkäisevät koronaa.
- Ibid.
- Koronarajoitukset tekivät isän hautajaisista pienet ja hiljaiset – Suvi Ylipää: ”Tuntui, että jotain jäi puuttumaan”.
- Väki kokoontui hautajaisiin eri puolilta Suomea Kouvolaan – noin 100 mahdollisesti altistunut koronatartunnalle.
- Jyväskylässä jopa 700 ihmistä karanteeniin hengellisessä tilaisuudessa tapahtuneen
- joukkoaltistumisen vuoksi, tartuntoja kaikkiaan 50.
- Sairaalapappien tuki hoitohenkilökunnalle kasvoi merkittävästi korona-aikana – potilastapaamisista osa siirtyi puhelimeen ja nettiin.
- e.g. Tampereella ruoka-avun tarve jatkuu korkeana, seurakuntien hätäapukeräys toi 110 000 euroa.
- Diakonissat avuksi rokottamiseen? – Kirkko vastaa sosiaali- ja terveystieteiden avunpyyntöön.

- e.g. Kaarinan seurakunta luovuttaa Kaarinan kirkon rokotuskeskukseksi.
- Kirkon walk-in-terapia auttaa nuoria ilman ajanvarausta.
- Ibid.
- Korona paljasti yhteiskunnan haavoittuvuuden.
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- « Le risque est d’oublier la dignité humaine des personnes âgées et vulnérables » | CNRS Le journal
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- « Comment être sûr qu’il sera bien traité ? » : après les révélations sur les Ehpad Orpea, le dilemme des familles
- Comment allons-nous vieillir ? - On peut plus rien dire | Podcast avec Acast
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- Messes : comment maintenir le lien avec ceux qui ne peuvent revenir à l’église ?
- Le difficile retour à l’église après le déconfinement
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- “Lebt miteinander - jetzt und bis zuletzt!”
- “Ich war nie so enttäuscht von Kirche wie in Corona-Zeiten!”
- “Leben bis zuletzt oder Sterben in Einsamkeit?”
- “Mit COVID-19 leben – zwei Jahre nach Beginn der Pandemie”
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268. Korona virus COVID-19: Informacije za državljane Republike Srbije u inostranstvu

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272. Borba za pravo na Vaskrs u Srbiji (Dr Zoran Čvorović, dr Vladimir Dimitrijević)

273. Borba za pravo na Vaskrs u Srbiji (Dr Zoran Čvorović, dr Vladimir Dimitrijević)

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