

ADVENT OF THE MUSTARD-SEED CHURCH?

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CASEY CHALK
THE CHURCH IN THE CROSSHAIRS

STUART SQUIRES
ON DYING ALONE DURING A PANDEMIC

FREDERICK W. MARKS
THE ANCIENT GAME OF GUILT ABATEMENT

Their decision to fall in line behind their bureaucrat masters could prove devastating to the presence of the Church in our aggressively secular society. A dramatic decrease in butts in the pews will lead to significant losses at the collection plate. In England it already has. This July Bishop Mark Davies of Shrewsbury announced that diocesan income had fallen by one-third since late March, when the British government announced lockdowns, jeopardizing the diocese's ability to maintain its buildings. The Diocese of Phoenix, meanwhile, is anticipating a \$6 million reduction in revenue for the fiscal year beginning July 1. In response it has cut jobs, reduced priests' pay, and ceased publishing its print newspaper. Elsewhere, the jobs of parish and diocesan administrators, musicians, directors of catechesis, and school teachers and principals are similarly at risk.

Ultimately, the financial ebb could result in an acceleration of the merger and/or closure of parish schools and churches. To wit: This July the Diocese of Buffalo announced that the "continuing threat" of COVID-19 has "exacerbated financial challenges" brought on by the recent scandal involving its former bishop's mishandling of sex-abuse claims. In light of the "sharp decrease in parish revenues," the diocese will begin "identifying options for potential mergers of parishes and schools."

In fine, the Catholic Church at large should brace for an uncomfortable contraction.

But that might not necessarily be bad news.

Pope Benedict XVI predicted way back in 1997 that something like this could happen. "Maybe we are facing a new and different kind of epoch in the Church's history," he suggested in a book-length interview, published as *Salt of the Earth*, "where Christianity will again be characterized more by the mustard seed, where it will exist in small, seemingly insignificant groups that nonetheless live an intense struggle against evil and bring good into the world — that let God in."

Perhaps the Emeritus Pope really was prophetic; he was merely off by a couple decades.

Is it possible that one of the unforeseen outcomes of the bishops' bungling of the COVID-19 pandemic will be the advent of the mustard-seed Church that Benedict foretold?

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QUEST COLUMN

By STUART SQUIRES

Dying Alone During the Pandemic: The Example of St. Augustine

Over the past few months, since the COVID-19 pandemic threw our lives into chaos, many of those infected with the coronavirus have died alone in quarantine without their loved ones physically present. The inability to be with the dying, as one CNN journalist described it, "seems to feed on our deepest fears and prey on our primal instincts" (March 29). Dying alone, we are told, is a fate worse than death itself.

Although this fear is understandable, Catholics need not view the possibility of a solitary death with despair. Rather, dying alone can be an occasion for reconciliation with God. St. Augustine of Hippo, the Doctor of Grace, offers us a model of how this might be possible.

No one would call Augustine an introvert. Throughout his life, he was surrounded by friends and family. Probably the most famous story about him involves the time he was an adolescent and, with a group of friends, stole pears to throw at some pigs. They did not need the pears because they could get tastier ones than those they had stolen. They stole them merely for the excitement of doing what was forbidden. "It was foul and I loved it," Augustine later recounted in his *Confessions*. "I loved the self-destruction, I loved my fall, not the object for which I had fallen but my fall itself." The true thrill for him, however, was not the theft itself but thieving in the company of friends. Had he been alone, he tells us, he never would have done it.

Not all of Augustine's friendships were so

destructive, however. Years later, upon returning home after studying in Carthage, he befriended an unnamed young man whom he had known when they were both boys. They had many interests in common and must have engaged in lengthy conversations about religion because Augustine convinced him to become a member of the Manichaeans (the “fashionable new-age sect” of the late-ancient world, as James J. O’Donnell has described it) as Augustine was at the time. A year into their friendship, his friend contracted a fever and fell unconscious. With Augustine at his side, his family had him baptized, only for his health to improve. Assuming his friend would be as dismissive as he was, Augustine mocked his Baptism. His friend, however, had been transformed by the experience, and he informed Augustine that, if their friendship were to continue, he must not speak so condescendingly. Several days later, without Augustine by his side, his health relapsed, and he died. Augustine was desolated: “Everything on which I set my gaze was death. My hometown became a torture to me; my father’s house a strange world of unhappiness; all that I had shared with him was without him transformed into a cruel torment. My eyes looked for him everywhere, but he was not there.” Even 20 years later, Augustine’s pain was still so raw that he could not bear to write his friend’s name.

Augustine’s relationship with his mother, Monica, was also important to him. After he was baptized at the hands of St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, Augustine and his entourage were waiting at the port of Ostia in Italy to return to Africa. Standing at a window overlooking a garden, Augustine and his mother experienced what can only be described as a shared mystical experience. They were discussing the saints and how the pleasures of the body pale in comparison to the joys of eternal life. Their minds ascended beyond the physical plane toward God and reached “to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you [God] feed Israel eternally with truth for food.”

Not long afterwards, Monica fell deathly ill. In a fevered haze, she surprised her sons by telling them that she wanted to be buried there in Italy,

despite having insisted earlier that she be buried next to her husband in Africa. Navigius, Augustine’s brother, trying to lighten Monica’s spirits, told her that he hoped she would not be buried as a stranger in a strange land but in her home soil. Rebuking him, she told them that it did not matter where she is buried, and that they should not worry about the location of her resting place as it ultimately does not matter. “I have only one request to make of you,” she implored her sons, “that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you may be.”

With experiences like these, one would assume that Augustine would have wanted his closest friends and relations surrounding him when he was on his own deathbed. But the opposite was true. Ten days before he died, he barred anyone from visiting him, other than doctors and those who brought his meals. During that time, Augustine prayed to God for forgiveness of his past indiscretions. Possidius, his friend and hagiographer, said that in his final days, Augustine “ordered the Psalms of David, which are specially penitential, to be copied out and, when he was very weak, used to lie in bed facing the wall where the sheets of paper were put up, gazing at them and reading them, and copiously and continuously weeping as he read.”

Augustine is an *exemplum* for how we should think about the possibility of dying during this pandemic. Through his tears, Augustine reveals to us a profound insight: Dying alone is not a horror to be feared. Rather, it offers us an occasion for honest introspection and heartfelt contrition for the sins we have committed. In such a penitential moment — freed from the distractions of the presence of family and friends — we are given an opportunity to ask God for the forgiveness of our sins in this life, so that we may be united more quickly to Him in the next.

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