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The livestreamed Mass has provided people with familiar rhythms of prayer and a sense of connection with fellow parishioners.

Taking the Parish Online: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic

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Where were you when Masses were suspended?

Everyone who is involved in parish ministry can probably remember that moment and the questions that immediately came to mind: What now? Is it all over? Without the public celebration of the Eucharist, how can we be a parish community? How will we survive?

Washington state was the earliest epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States, and the Archdiocese of Seattle, where the authors serve at St. James Cathedral, was the first in the country to suspend the public celebration of the Mass. Mass was suspended at the Archdiocese of Seattle on March 11, 2020, when the governor set a limit on the size of public gatherings. Like most people, we expected and hoped that the pandemic would be of short duration: we thought our restrictive measures would speedily “flatten the curve” and that we’d be back in our churches by Easter. That did not happen, of course! Instead, we have seen evolving guidelines, both from the governor and from our archdiocese, which have allowed us to open

up, bit by bit, as our knowledge has grown of what works, what doesn’t, and how COVID-19 is spread.

The pandemic forced us to adapt—and fast. And adapting to changing circumstances is not easy since traditions are treasured. And in parish ministry, just about anything can become a tradition, whether it’s the kind of muffins served at coffee hour or the fact that Tuesdays are always, always the day of the St. Vincent de Paul Society meeting. “That’s the way we’ve always done it” is a mantra in many parishes, and ours was no exception. Our parish life had always been focused on worshiping and learning together, fostering community, and direct outreach to the poor and homeless in our inner-city neighborhood. Suddenly, almost none of that seemed to be possible.

The learning curve was steep, but, with some missteps along the way, adapted to circumstances. Parish ministers learned how to livestream and master virtual platforms. The parish used social media more than ever before and also rediscovered the power of a telephone call. In short, we continued to be a parish—online. In this article, we’ll explore some of the things our remarkable parish staff and volunteers did, what we

learned—and what innovations will continue to affect the way we do things when the pandemic is just a memory.

RESETTING OUR METHODS

Livestreaming Liturgies

Our parish had never livestreamed a liturgy or an event prior to the pandemic. The parish had a long tradition of broadcasting our midnight Mass on a local news station, but that was where our experience ended. In fact, while parish staff had toyed with the idea of installing equipment for livestreaming, significant steps had not been made in that direction. It was assumed that there would be little demand for a livestreamed Mass, and we worried that it might be seen as a substitute for coming to Mass in person. The pandemic changed all of that overnight.

Many of the parish staff struggled with the very concept of livestreamed liturgies. The Church has spent decades emphasizing the importance of the people's presence and participation in the liturgy. The exclusion of the assembly from the Mass was painful in proportion. Some suggested that the Liturgy of the Hours would be a more appropriate form of prayer in this time of pandemic, rather than watching a Mass livestreamed from an almost empty building. "Theater of the absurd," a priest friend called it. And yet, absurd or not, inadequate or not, it became clear that, while it was certainly no substitute for the real thing, a livestreamed Mass was what people wanted and needed in this moment. People wanted familiar rhythms of prayer and familiar faces, and the Mass provided that. And the livestream provided immediacy and a sense of connection with fellow parishioners. It was important that we listen to them. "Thank you for the livestreamed Mass this morning. It means a lot to be connected to the cathedral, and through the cathedral, to Christ, especially during these times," one parishioner wrote, expressing the feelings of many. St. Thérèse of Lisieux famously said: "No doubt, it is a great grace to receive the sacraments. When God does not permit it, it is good too! Everything is grace!" We certainly learned this as we navigated livestreaming liturgies, first from a staff member's iPhone, and later from a professionally installed system.

Holy Week for us, as for everyone, was a surreal experience, as the pews were empty and so many beloved elements of these liturgies were stripped away because of the pandemic. And yet one parishioner wrote at the end of it: "I am so grateful for virtual reality this past week. I have watched every second and feel more immersed in Holy Week than any other year, even though it is a strange one. I yearn for the reality of being together as a congregation again and receiving the Eucharist. How much more precious are the things we cannot have. The isolation has forced many of us to reexamine our 'busy' lives and decide what is truly important. My faith, my family, my friendships. Do I make time for the important things? Some good will come from this horrible pandemic but lives will be changed. Let's hope for the better."

There is no question that while the liturgies might be virtual, the prayer, the transformative power of the liturgy, and the sense of community are real.

Like many parishes, we have also discovered, through the livestreaming of our liturgies, that our community is greatly expanded. The parish has welcomed (virtually) visitors from

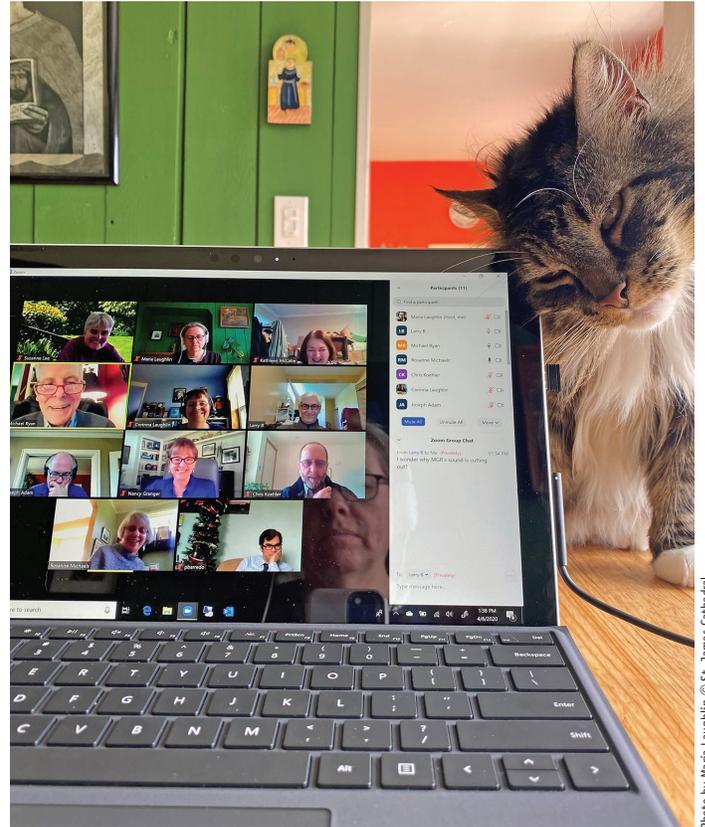


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Online platforms that allow for staff to meet and faith formation sessions to continue have expanded the number of people able to attend parish events.

across our archdiocese, reconnected with cathedral "alumni," and encountered new friends from as far away as England and Nepal. Some former parishioners who now live in another diocese wrote: "Our weekends have been a blessing because of your livestreams. We have missed St. James more than even we could believe. Thank you over and over again!" Another commented: "I want to thank you for keeping the Masses and musical events available to us here on Maui! It has been our spiritual nourishment each week. Even when this pandemic is behind us and the vaccine has been abundantly distributed, I do hope you will continue to keep the videos . . . available to us who are not able to be in Seattle to attend personally. It has meant a lot to me to be reconnected virtually to my Seattle roots." The parish intends to keep livestreaming Mass, at least weekly, so that it can continue to provide spiritual nourishment to the homebound, and to allow our parish ministries to reach a much wider community.

Sacramental Preparation for Children and Adults

For those looking forward to great sacramental moments, the lockdown was particularly difficult. Children who had been preparing for months for their first Communion, teens who had prepared for the sacrament of confirmation, young couples who had been planning for their wedding day, and perhaps most of all, our catechumens in the Christian initiation process who had been eagerly anticipating the sacraments of baptism, confirmation,



Photo by Maria Laughlin © St. James Cathedral

Parishioners at St. James Cathedral continued their outreach to the needy by preparing food at home to be distributed to shelters.

and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil—all had to put their lives on hold.

As it became clear that the pandemic would not last just a few weeks, or even a few months, we began to move our weekly gatherings for sacramental preparation online. Learning to navigate a virtual platform was the order of the day. Soon it was discovered that for all the shortcomings of these virtual interactions, it was indeed possible to learn together, pray together, and in a very real way, be together online.

As the months went by, and we made our first steps back toward public worship, we began scheduling the sacraments. It was important to balance people's eagerness to celebrate these milestone moments with an individual's level of readiness or discomfort with gathering for public worship. Pastorally, it was important to allow each individual to discern readiness for these sacramental celebrations. The baptism of our elect did not come until August, but it was worth waiting for!

Faith Formation for Adults

As a downtown, inner-city parish, with parishioners coming from some 180 zip codes, we have always found it challenging to draw parishioners back downtown for events on weekdays. To be honest, the last thing anyone in Seattle wants to do is get in the car and drive downtown in the evening—only to have to hunt for a parking spot. In spite of this reality, our team has persisted, month after month, year after year, in preparing wonderful offerings—lectures, concerts, retreats, classes—in which only a tiny fraction of the parish can participate.

Suddenly, the pandemic forced us to experiment with online offerings. And staff realized that there were no work orders to submit or chairs to arrange. No one needed to struggle with projectors, make coffee, or lay in a supply of cookies. And, more importantly, parishioners did not have to contend with traffic or parking, and the lockdowns left many of us with plenty of downtime. As a result, our online events have drawn in people

who had never participated in an in-person event at the cathedral, outside of Mass. It has been wonderful, and rewarding, to see the response to all kinds of adult faith formation offerings—lectures, retreats, Bible study, as well as small faith sharing groups, film screenings, conversations around social justice, and so much more.

As a cathedral parish, we have always emphasized music and the arts as part of our mission to the community. But we struggled with how to do that, with music at Mass severely curtailed and concerts out of the question. Our music department began to offer a weekly livestreamed musical prayer from the cathedral, which people could experience live on Facebook or Vimeo, or listen to at their leisure. It has been a wonderful way to keep music alive in the parish during the pandemic. Another offering has been a “Poem of the Week,” a short, six- or seven-minute video including the reading of a poem that connects to faith themes followed by commentary. People have loved these simple offerings and have made them

part of their week throughout the pandemic (and have asked us to keep them going when the pandemic is over).

Through all these offerings, the parish staff has learned to be flexible and to meet people where they are. When we are able to adapt and try new things, we can expand our reach and draw new people. And the toll on the environment is significantly less when people do not need to get in their cars to attend. While virtual events will never replace in-person learning, Zoom will definitely be a part of our future.

STAYING CONNECTED

Creating community in a large parish like ours has always been one of our greatest challenges, and it has become much more difficult during these days of pandemic. Even after our return to public Mass, the sense of isolation that comes from social distancing, mask wearing, and the inability to join our voices in hymns of praise, or to gather after Mass for coffee and conversation, have been a difficult adjustment. There is no way to know the long-term impact of all this on our parish community. However, a variety of initiatives have been undertaken to keep the community connected in the meantime.

Reaching Out to Parishioners

In the early days of the pandemic, the parish staff was keenly aware that almost exclusively the voices of the clergy were being heard. The staff reached out to parishioners and invited them to offer reflections and advice on how they were surviving the strangeness of the early days of the pandemic. More than twenty parishioners participated, recording videos that we shared on our social media channels and website. These were inspiring reflections and a wonderful way to see other faces, and hear other voices, during lockdown.

Our pastor was inspired to offer a series of reflections in video format, which helped extend his pastoral presence to hundreds of parishioners, who were delighted to learn a bit more

about his personal faith journey and to feel a deeper connection with him.

As a pastoral team, we made phone calls to parishioners to check in on them, beginning with older parishioners but gradually reaching out to almost everyone. (As a side benefit of the exercise, a lot of wrong numbers were found in the directory.) We had some wonderful conversations and made connections that were deeply valued.

Other projects came about almost by chance. One parishioner made dozens of hand-drawn greeting cards with messages of encouragement during her time sheltering in place at home. These were sent to seniors and other homebound members of the community. At Christmas, many parishioners volunteered to write and send Christmas cards to fellow parishioners, a simple and easy outreach that we had never done before but which spoke to caring and community in a palpable way.

Serving the Larger Community

St. James Cathedral has a robust outreach to the poor and needy in downtown Seattle. When the stay-at-home order was announced, our Cathedral Kitchen had to close for the first time in anyone's memory. It was devastating to see the kitchen guests dispersed, and not to have a way to reach out to them. Our outreach staff shifted gears and invited parishioners to prepare casseroles and sandwiches at home. The food was collected at the cathedral and distributed to emergency shelters throughout the city. At last, the same weekend we reopened for public Mass, we reopened our Sunday morning breakfast and Cathedral Kitchen, and have found ways to prepare the meals in a way that is safe both for our volunteers and for our guests.

In addition, we have discovered "contactless" ways to reach out to the poor. Our holiday giving tree went online. Instead of dropping off a gift at Sunday Mass, parishioners were invited to go online and order the gift directly from two entities and have it shipped to the cathedral, to be delivered to those in need before the holiday. The packages poured in throughout December, a wonderful thing to see. As one parishioner wrote: "It's such a blessing to be part of St. James, this wonderful parish family that even a pandemic can't stop!"

CONCLUSION

As we write this, the pandemic continues to rage on, but vaccines are slowly but surely beginning to be rolled out, and we finally seem to be able to glimpse a time when life will return to normal. As we begin to discuss what that will look like for our parish community, we are trying to avoid those very words: "return to normal." The pandemic has been longer and more challenging than any of us ever anticipated. It has taken its toll on us and on parish life in ways we cannot begin to understand just yet.

But, as St. Thérèse said, "all is grace," and this challenging time has had its moments of grace and opportunity as well. We know that there is no adequate substitute for people gathering together, singing together, praying together, learning together, and serving together. We still believe that building community is at the very heart of the mission of the parish. We know that we are called to "become islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of



Photo by Maria Laughlin © St. James Cathedral

During warm weather, Mass has been celebrated outdoors where the faithful could maintain a social distance.

indifference" (Pope Francis, message for Lent, 2015). But we've also learned that real things can happen in virtual settings—real prayer, learning, service, healing, and relationship can happen online. And that's a power we will continue to harness even after social distancing and mandatory face masks are things of the past. ♦

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