

Reinventing Liturgical Ministry during COVID-19

Father John Hibbard, Chair of the Liturgical Commission

It has been six months since news of a pandemic spread across the world, and our lives changed completely. On Saturday, March 14, 2020, the Archdiocese joined the rest of the country and the world in closing our churches. The priests of the Archdiocese celebrated Mass for the Third Sunday of Lent in empty churches, and people stayed isolated in their homes. But the priests were not idle. Articles circulated on the Internet about how to respond to the Coronavirus, and these were posted on parish websites. I posted two of them myself: “A Faith Response to the Coronavirus” and “How should I spend my Sundays when public Masses are cancelled?” The Central Deanery had planned a Prayer Vigil to Saint Joseph, Patron of Canada, for March 19th, and its Prayer to Saint Joseph was hurriedly altered to fit the new situation.

By the Fourth Sunday of Lent (March 22nd), several parishes were already experimenting with live or recorded Masses via YouTube, Facebook, and Vimeo. In a very short time, Mass was available on the Internet from parishes in all four corners of the Archdiocese. For many priests, learning this technology was a steep curve; although there were several “younger” priest with more technological expertise. Nevertheless, getting the picture and the sound calibrated took a few weeks of adjustment. Some parishes did not have a strong enough Internet signal to telecast, but that did not stop them. They used the signal from cellphones – a technology I still do not understand. As the weeks went by, an increasing number of parishes were livestreaming Sunday Mass, and a few were also bringing their parishioners daily Mass via a webcam, which worked well in small, confined spaces. Several priests moved the Tabernacle so that it could be seen from the outside of the church, and parishioners were invited to come in their cars and pray before the Blessed Sacrament. There were even a few ingenious parishes which offered the Sacrament of Confession outside, or from a Rectory window, or between cars in the parking lot.

Holy Week was a particular challenge, as the Sacred Triduum could not be celebrated with parishioners present. One priest offered the Archdiocese a series of reflections, which were cleverly entitled, “I Will Keep Passover at Your House”. Some deacons prepared meditations. Many parishes livestreamed their Holy Week Liturgies, and Stations of the Cross for both adults and children were posted on parish websites. Later, I recorded two series: the first was a five-part series on the “Significance of Sunday”; the second was a 13-part series on the “The Eucharist”. Both of these will receive more prominence when Sunday Masses return to a more normal manner of celebration. I suspect that, after a long abeyance of the Sunday obligation, it will be important to remind people of the significance of the Sunday Eucharist. We are still living with the uncertainty of what will happen in the future. Many parishioners are waiting to celebrate First Communion and Confirmation with their children. Weddings and Baptisms have been postponed or celebrated very simply.

During this pandemic, when the celebration of the Sacraments has been impossible, I have often thought of the Christians in Japan, China, Korea, and other areas of the world who have survived hundreds of years without priests and the Eucharist. Despite trials and challenges, the lay people have kept the faith alive and active. They catechized their children and converts and celebrated Baptism. Although we are not in the same dire situation as they, we, too, are facing a crisis. Our churches are open at 30% capacity, but many people are still hesitant to return. However, the practice of our faith does not have to be hesitant. After most people had completed a thorough house cleaning in the early months of the pandemic, they turned to prayer and spiritual reading, making their homes a true domestic church. With strong homes, we have strong parishes. Saint Peter, in his First Letter, wrote: “... now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.” [1 Peter 1:6-7]