News



Usher Joseph Gedeon takes up a collection during a 2016 Mass at St. Martha Church in Uniondale, N.Y. With canceled Masses and limited offertories amid the coronavirus pandemic, U.S. church leaders are predicting an income squeeze that will affect parishes, dioceses and national collections. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)



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One byproduct of canceled Masses is no offertory collection. And a byproduct of no offertory collection is puncture wounds in the budgets of parishes, dioceses and national collections.

"It's a big hit, and it's gonna hurt," said Patrick Markey, executive director of the Diocesan Fiscal Management Conference, based in Phoenix.

Rare is the U.S. diocese that has not canceled public Masses in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. Some announced a two-week cancellation in hopes of resuming them for Passion Sunday. Others, following the Vatican's lead, have opted to call off any public celebrations through Easter. Still others are in an "until further notice" holding pattern.

How long a parish can go without receiving revenue from parishioners is a still-unanswered question. Dioceses that assess parishes a percentage of offertory income also would feel the pinch, so help from them for financially hurting parishes is limited, according to Markey.

"Rather than the chancery giving them money, the chancery needs the money from the parishes to allow it to operate," he said.

Another factor is national collections, with one slated for the weekend of March 21-22 in most U.S. parishes. The Catholic Relief Services collection helps more than CRS, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency. It also provides funding for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Offices of International Justice and Peace, Migration and Refugee Services, and Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees, the Vatican's own relief work and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network.

CRS' annual Rice Bowl campaign in U.S. parishes concludes in early April. Also due up: the Pontifical Collection for the Holy Land, traditionally done on Good Friday — April 10 this year — and the Catholic Home Missions Appeal, scheduled for the weekend Masses of April 25-26.

For many national collections, the collection itself is the primary source of funding, said Mary Mencarini Campbell, executive director of the USCCB Office of National Collections. "We literally have all of our eggs in the collection basket," she added.

"We've seen in other downturns, they've given immediately to help out," Markey said, but "if they're not in a church to hear that appeal, they're not going to think about it. It's going to have a big impact. I just would urge people to remember the church, even though they're not home. Send a check to the parish anyway, just as you would if you were in church. All those parishes rely on those donations to operate."

He added some U.S. Catholics "may not be receiving their own paycheck" as government-ordered closures have thrown many people out of work. It may become a situation that parishes and dioceses also face.

Dioceses and churches are "trying to make contingency plans," Markey said. "They understand from an HR (human resources) perspective how to do it. They'll want to pay everybody, but they have to be realistic about that." He added, "In the short term, they can continue making payroll to all of the employees, but at some point, they'll have to start looking at other options."

The main reason for the uncertainty is that no one knows for just how long life on lockdown may last.

"It's one thing as we watch Mass attendance go down. It's another when the only situation we have similar to this is when a major blizzard hits early in the year and it really impacts giving in particular regions, but it's not the entire country," Campbell said. "This is uncharted waters. "

"Uncharted waters" was a phrase used also by Archbishop Paul D. Etienne of Seattle, chairman of the USCCB Committee on National Collections.

"The focus clearly for bishops today is on our people," he told Catholic News Service. "We are facing a pandemic, and every bishop in this country right now is making

many, many, many decisions about keeping our people safe, our parishioners, our workers, our volunteers."

As archbishop of an area that became an early epicenter of the pandemic, he said: "We're already working with parishes to get a sense of what their cash reserves are and how long that can carry them, and what we as an archdioceses will hopefully be able to do to help bridge things until normalcy returns again.

"But we're in uncharted waters now. Right now, people's health and safety is our primary concern. But we're looking at the present reality and we will start putting in place a plan to help our parishes get back on their feet again — and the archdiocese."

Etienne added, "But we trust always in the goodness of our people. They always step up and I have trust in God and I have trust in the people of God, and I'm not going to let go of that — either one."

Mark Melia, CRS executive vice president of charitable giving, said in a March 19 statement: "With the situation in flux and so much uncertainty, we don't know what the impacts on giving could be. However, around the world CRS is helping our church partners to respond to this crisis in creative ways. Given the adverse economic implications, donors likely too will be facing economic challenges themselves."

There are about 17,000 Catholic parishes in the United States, but a small percentage offer online donation services. One such service, Faith Direct, counts about 900 Catholic clients, less than 5.3% of all U.S. parishes.

However, as the number of diocesan Mass cancellations began rising, Faith Direct sales manager Mike Walsh said inquiries have gone "through the roof."

The intent of online giving is to move away from the offertory envelopes that have been used for generations at parishes and toward a "managed giving" system that can provide income to the parish, and for second collections, even when the parishioner isn't at church on a given Sunday, said Brad Otto, Faith Direct general manager.

"We target 25-30% using Faith Direct within the first year, then we look to increase that number by 10% annually. Within the first five years of the Faith Direct program,

we want to see roughly 60-65% percent of their donors using Faith Direct," Otto said. Pastors, he added are generally happy if they see "well over 50% of their donating households, or 50% of their offertory, coming through Faith Direct."

Both Otto and Markey, another fan of online giving, said that one obstacle is that the older the giver — who tends to be the parish's most generous donor — the less inclined they are to switch to online giving.

Regina Haney, executive director of the National Association of Church Personnel Administrators, told CNS parishes are taking varied approaches with their staff without offertory money coming in.

One parish, rather than carrying out layoffs, may slot an employee into a lower-paying job to keep them on the payroll, Haney said. Another parish, without much of a cash reserve, may have to let a staffer go but offer to pay their health insurance; "pay us back when you can, but we'll pay the premium," is how Haney put it.

"They're trying to keep people employed," she said. "They would cut hours. There would still be income."

"We're all going to have to pray more," Markey said, "and we should all pray the Our Father," with special emphasis on the phrase, "Give us this day our daily bread." "We're asking God to help us," he added. "Rely on God more than ourselves."

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