News



B.J. Buxton tends the garden at her Medford, Ore., home March 19, 2020. Working in a garden beside a statue of Mary offers her another spiritual refuge at a time when public Masses are canceled amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. (CNS/courtesy B.J. Buxton)

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Early in the coronavirus pandemic, even before Archbishop Alexander K. Sample of Portland canceled public Masses, the advice came that Catholics 60 and older should stay away from liturgies.

Their age put them in a high-risk category for suffering serious consequences from COVID-19.

Though sensible, the measure came as a hard spiritual knock for older Catholics. Retired and reflective, they count parishes as the very hub of life. At the same time, they form the very foundation of their faith communities.

Jean Mitchell, who turns 89 in May, usually sits near the front at The Madeleine Church in Northeast Portland. "With the Pharisees," she joked.

Mitchell misses Mass and all that is part of it: friends, "wonderful music," youngsters plodding up for a blessing before children's liturgy, thought-provoking humor from Fr. Mike Biewend, the pastor.

Then comes the pinnacle. "When our celebrant lifts the host and the wine to be consecrated, I recall what Jesus said: 'This is my body; this is my blood,'" Mitchell told the Catholic Sentinel, Portland's archdiocesan newspaper. "He made that plain to his disciples and all his followers that he was serious; the host and the wine become his body and blood. God can do anything."

Mitchell imagines seeing long lines of parishioners and guests going to Communion. She loves knowing that she is one of millions who can receive Jesus.

"I will miss those times," she said, "and look forward to having them again."

Until the stay-at-home order came through March 23, B.J. Buxton made daily trips to the adoration chapel at Sacred Heart Church in Medford. She and the other adorers kept their social distance. But she wants no room between her and the Lord.

Buxton, 72, has viewed Mass on the internet, and it is fine but lacking.

"It is different to watch than to be there," she said. "I can say the prayers but I am not saying them with anyone. When I am at church I am with my faith family. They are right there. Participating with family in the body of Christ — there is nothing that can replace that."

Buxton's parish-based faith-sharing group has changed to digital conversations, which also leave her wanting more community life.

"When we can come together again, we need to be singing 'Alleluia' and rejoice," she said.

There are some consolations. At home, Buxton is engaged in spiritual reading and tending her garden, which includes a statue of Mary.

"It's heartbreaking that I cannot receive the Eucharist and that we will not be able to attend Mass at Easter," said Kathy Phillips, a member of the pastoral council at Holy Trinity Parish in Bandon. "The catechumens scheduled to be baptized on Holy Saturday won't be able to enter the church. It is testing our faith. We need to be strong."

Kitt Jordan, 74, has been blind since an accident in his youth. Touch, the presence of other people in his vicinity, is vital to him. Mass on a screen lacks what he yearns for.



B.J. Buxton reads "The Tears of Christ," daily reflections by St. John Henry Newman, in her Medford, Ore., home March 19, 2020. With public Masses canceled amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Catholics are turning to home spiritual practice. (CNS/courtesy B.J. Buxton)

"It does not have the kick it has in person," said Jordan, a member of The Madeleine in Portland. "I miss the Eucharist."

That said, Jordan did enjoy listening to a video Biewend sent March 17. The priest, in his apartment, did a jig as a St. Patrick's Day greeting and blessing.

Jordan and wife Corinne belong to the World Apostolate of Fatima, a Marian Catholic group. Those meetings also have been canceled.

Jordan worries about "getting out of spiritual shape." So he and Corinne say the rosary and the chaplet of divine mercy in their living room every day and say night prayers.

"Being a longtime advocate of accepting the will of God, I can be comfortable with accepting what his will brings about," said Connie Manning, a 90-year-old member of St. Rose Parish in Northeast Portland. Manning belongs to a parish book club, which also has suspended in-person meetings. Last year, a fellow book club member gave Manning Jean-Pierre De Caussade's "Abandonment To Divine Providence."

"This book reinforced my acceptance of the will of God," said Manning.

Then, in February, Fr. Matt Libra gave all parishioners a copy of "The Surrender Novena."

"This is another powerful encouragement to trust in God, himself, to watch over everything in your life," said Manning, who also reads the Magnificat Missal at home and has watched Mass online.

"As a child, I heard adults discussing how one day all churches would be locked, and we wouldn't be able to enter and worship God," said Sharon Hennick, director of religious education at Holy Trinity Parish in Bandon.

"That sounded like something that would not happen — never in the United States of America," she said. "I feel devastated that Palm Sunday and the Easter Triduum will

pass without attending Mass and feeling the presence of the risen Christ."

Priests also are struggling. "It has been a very challenging time as a priest, especially not being able to celebrate Mass with the people of God," said Fr. Anthony Ahamefule, parish administrator in Bandon. "Our closeness to one another in the parish, which reflects our closeness to God, has been greatly affected due to the coronavirus. However, our faith, hope, and trust in God carry us through in dark times."

Many Catholics look forward brightly to the day when Mass returns.

"As the foundation of my faith and an integral part of my walk with Jesus Christ, it makes me think more that the first time back will be a day to always remember, along with an unforgettable Lent," said Pete Lennon, a member of St. Rose in Portland.

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