News



Fr. Michael Pfleger hands out free masks to parishioners and neighbors of St. Sabina Church on Chicago's South Side where he is pastor. (Courtesy of St. Sabina Church)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Editor's note: *On Holy Thursday, Pope Francis prayed for the dead as well as for the priests, doctors and nurses who he said represented the "saints next door" during the coronavirus pandemic. Over the next months, National Catholic Reporter and Global Sisters Report will be bringing the stories of Catholics in this crisis: those who have died, but also those whose service brings hope. To submit names of people for consideration for this series, please send a note to saintsnextdoor@ncronline.org.*



After stopping in to check on his parents earlier this month, Keith Rodney took his 92-year-old father, James, who was ill, to the hospital.

The elder man, a Korean War veteran, was active at St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where he organized the annual Veteran's Day celebration. A former high school principal and administrator, he also had been involved with the Knights of Peter Claver, the Knights of Columbus and the St. Vincent De Paul Food Bank.

James died in the hospital on April 9, of COVID-19. Keith, 57, died five days later.

Divine Word Fr. Richard Andrus presided over the graveside service for the father, with only one relative able to attend. James' wife and Keith's mother, Barbara, is herself recovering from coronavirus.*

As pastor of a parish in a predominantly African American neighborhood, Andrus is doing a lot of graveside services these days, since the coronavirus has proved to be especially deadly in black and brown communities. Nationally, 30% of COVID-19 patients are African American, even though they make up around 13% of the population, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In some states, the disparity is even more shocking: In Wisconsin, for example, African Americans make up 6% of the population but represent 25% of cases and 39% of COVID-19 deaths, according to data analyzed by Mother Jones.

African Americans and Latinos also are being tested for coronavirus at much lower rates, so racial disparities may be even worse than currently reported, according to a study by Johns Hopkins University.

Andrus said at least six parishioners of St. Paul the Apostle have died, including prominent disability rights activist April Dunn, who was 33. The priest also participated in the burial service of his own 86-year-old uncle, James Andrus, the last living relative in that generation in his family, who died of the disease. But since the service was in Ohio, Fr. Andrus had to watch via Facebook Live.

Not being able to hug mourners has been hard.

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"It's been very, very difficult, because you can't comfort people, except by words," Andrus told NCR. "For me, words aren't really enough. I find that, like Jesus did, healing and comfort come with touch. It's a very physical thing in the black community."

In the Detroit Archdiocese, most black Catholics know someone who has been affected by the virus, said Vickie Figueroa, manager of the Office of Cultural Ministries and Black Catholic Ministries there.

Detroit is "getting slammed," Figueroa said, in part because of racial and socioeconomic disparities that have plagued the city for decades. Higher-than-average rates of pre-existing conditions such as diabetes and asthma among African Americans, combined with a distrust of the health care system in some black communities, makes the virus deadlier.

"A lot of people say we should take more responsibility," Figueroa said. "But when you're working a service job and can't call off, and don't have the luxury of working remotely at home where it's safe, how much responsibility can you really take?"

Figueroa is also concerned about the financial fall-out from the quarantine, though she predicts even more dire suffering in the next months, after people have "burned through their savings and lost their safety nets."

Yet recent protests demanding to open the country more quickly, including one at the Michigan state capitol in Lansing April 15, do not represent the views of most African Americans, said Jesse Cox, director of campus ministry at Madonna University outside Detroit.

And a White House advisor's comparison of those protesting social distancing to civil rights icon Rosa Parks was "unfair," he said.

"As Catholics and African Americans who are at the center of this pandemic, we have to look out for the common good and use common sense," said Cox. "Those two things are connected."

Cox has been donating blood and sewing masks, which he plans to distribute to friends, while also offering online evening prayer services and making one-on-one phone calls to students.

As the saying in the African American community goes: "God always makes a way."

"One of the strengths of the African American population is that sense of community that historically we've had," said C. Vanessa White, assistant professor of spirituality and ministry at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

She is hopeful that today's challenges will lead to a "retrieval" of community and "new possibilities of being church," less tied to a building yet still faith-filled.

Figueroa agrees. "When one of us is sick, we're all sick," she said. "But the great thing is we all rely on each other."



Staff from St. Sabina Church on Chicago's South Side share free masks with people in the neighborhood. (Courtesy of St. Sabina Church)

Despite the limitations of sheltering in place, leaders in African American churches are creatively connecting with parishioners and neighbors to keep that sense of community throughout this crisis. In addition to livestreamed Masses — complete with gospel music, if not full choirs — parishes are setting up phone prayer trees, providing social services and even delivered Easter baskets to all the children in one religious education program.

At St. Sabina Church on Chicago's South Side, the parish is providing day care through its Ark program. The parish offers food distribution, and its employment center's computers are available for people to apply for unemployment or do webinars for skills-training. Pastor Fr. Michael Pfleger and parish volunteers have passed out thousands of masks in the neighborhood.

"We're trying to ease the pain in the community," said Kimberly Lymore, associate minister. "The need is very great here, but also it's nothing new."

In addition to underperforming schools, poverty and lack of affordable housing, the community is now dealing with unemployment and illness due to the pandemic. "People are getting more desperate," she said.

Still, the parish — known for its dynamic pastor and community outreach — is trying to encourage hope with its theme of "Faith over Fear" during the pandemic. "In times of tragedy and disaster, people pull together," Lymore said.

St. Sabina's collections have been "decent" despite having only livestreamed Masses, she said. Some give online, while older parishioners walk their tithe checks over to the rectory.

But some smaller parishes in African American neighborhoods are struggling — and were already struggling before the pandemic. A phone meeting this month with the Chicago Archdiocese's Black Catholic Initiative encouraged larger parishes to help smaller ones — some which don't even have websites — and to reach out to younger members to help offer online connection.

Having to work together during lockdown has made parish networks stronger, said Tina Carter, coordinator for religious education at St. Anselm in Chicago, which already clusters with four nearby parishes for religious ed.

"The one thing this virus has certainly taught us is that our location isn't what makes us a church," Carter told NCR.

The parish offers livestreamed Masses, but for older parishioners — who make up the majority of active church-goers in many black parishes — phone calls are often the best way to connect.

"Our parishioners don't necessarily have a computer, much less know how to use it," Carter said, adding that some families still have dial-up internet connections, which they are sharing with children who use it for school.

St. Anselm's offered the Stations of the Cross over the phone during Lent and now has weekly calls in which parishioners share spiritual and scriptural resources.

"The key is to get a sense of what the needs of the people are and to try to do whatever you can to deliver upon those needs," Carter said.

One need that parishes can't deliver: more testing for the virus, including for those without transportation, she said. And she worries that as the lockdown progresses, people who were already in "survivor mode" will grow increasingly desperate for necessities like food and shelter.

Still, she is hopeful: "One of the beautiful things out of this crazy situation is how much people are coming together to help one another," she said. "Even though we are physically distant, we are still socially and spiritually connected."

At St. Paul's in Baton Rouge, Andrus is using the Call-Em-All app to give a robo-call message via phone on Friday evenings, and his Mass on Facebook Live attracts some 1,200 hits, even though the parish has only 500 families.

"Worship is what really keeps people's faith alive and keeps people's spirit strong," he said, quoting a woman who once told him that she went to Mass on Sunday to find the strength to get through the rest of the week.

He's reminded of two other sayings in the black church: "This too shall pass" and "It may be Good Friday, but never forget Sunday's comin'."

"In times like these, people's resilience is based on their faith," he said. "They've been through troubling times before, and there will be troubling times in the future. The only thing people have to hold onto is their faith and trust in God."

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter: @HeidiSchlumpf.]

**This story has been updated to correct that Andrus presided over the graveside service for just James Rodney, and to provide updated information that Barbara is*

recovering from the coronavirus.

This story appears in the **Saints Next Door** feature series. View the full series.
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