News



Fr. Michal Sajnog of Our Lady of the Wayside Parish in Chaptico, Maryland, gives Communion to a woman on Pentecost Sunday May 31. About two-and-a-half months after public Masses were halted due to safety precautions against the spread of the coronavirus, parishioners came home to Mass as some restrictions were lifted in the Archdiocese of Washington. (CNS/Andrew Biraj, Catholic Standard)



by Peter Feuerherd

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Will they come back?

That's the question on the minds of parish leaders in the 17,000 American Catholic churches as the U.S. begins a return to a new normal post-pandemic life.

There are no guarantees, say Marti Jewell and Mark Mogilka, authors of "Open Wide the Doors to Christ: A Study of Catholic Social Innovation for Parish Vitality," just published by Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities, or FADICA, an organization for Catholic philanthropists who support church activities.

The two interviewed and studied two dozen parishes across the country, selected because of their reputation of vitality, along with more than 65 ministry leaders. Each parish in the study remained anonymous in the interest of providing candid input.

Vitality, noted the authors, is a somewhat amorphous concept. But you know it when you see it, Mogilka told NCR in a June 9 Zoom interview, with Mogilka participating from his home in Green Bay, Wisconsin, and Jewell from Richmond, Virginia.

"You can feel it, it's tangible. There's an excitement. People are excited to meet you," said Mogilka. Parishioners in vibrant parishes are likely to stay later on Sundays and greet newcomers. The parish bulletin contains information about activities that go well beyond weekends, including social service outreach. The result is often like that experienced at a superb restaurant: word gets out from enthusiastic patrons willing to tell their friends and neighbors about their spiritual and social ministry experiences.

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>
> —Marti Jewell
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Whether or not Catholics come back after the pandemic will depend much upon what their parishes were like before the pandemic struck. What's clear, they said, is that change will be needed. "Pastors have to let go of 'they will go back and we'll do it as we did,' " Jewell told NCR.

Mogilka, a consultant for Meitler Inc., a church planning and consulting firm, is more definitive.

"In the short-term they will not actually come back. This is a marathon, not a sprint," he said. Much of that has to do with wider cultural issues, and whether people will feel safe venturing outside into crowds. He noted that a recent study of major league baseball fans indicated that only a small minority contemplate going to ballparks in the near future, with the rest content to watch the game on television.

The same is happening in church life, he said, as Catholics adjust to the new Zoom age. That has some advantages. At his parish, Resurrection in Green Bay, nearly 700 parishioners showed up for a virtual town hall. Similar events included only about 50 done live before the pandemic.

"I feel we are called to redefine what we mean by community," said Mogilka, noting that, in another positive development, shut-ins and the disabled are feeling more of a part of the parish than ever before, able to access parish events via social media like everyone else.

There are drawbacks, however. Mogilka noted that about a third of all parishioners don't access social media, in part because older parishioners are often uncomfortable with the technology or rural residents have poor internet connections.

When the pandemic hit, parish staffs were taken aback. But many, after the initial shock, have responded with missionary zeal, the authors said.

Mogilka, for one, received a phone call during the pandemic from a parish staffer, asking how he was doing as a longtime senior member. That had never happened before. That simple act has become a basic part of many parishes' outreach during the pandemic, and should be incorporated into church life post-pandemic as well, the authors said.

Jewell, associate theology professor emerita from the University of Dallas and a former diocesan director in the Archdiocese of Louisville, Kentucky, noted that the report on parish life has clues in it that will indicate which parishes will emerge as vibrant communities after the pandemic. It won't be those that are closed in, as a club exclusively concerned with its own members.

The model of parishioners ensconced in a tight community, keeping the rest of the world away, is fading away. "Those days of safety are over," Jewell said.



Fr. Anh Tuan Phan of Christ the King Church in Nashville, Tennessee, uses holy water as he celebrates a Mass for extraordinary ministers of holy Communion and the leadership of the parish young adult group May 24. It was the first weekend after the public celebration of Masses was allowed in the Nashville Diocese after the shut down caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. (CNS/Rick Musacchio, Tennessee Register)

In their study, Jewell and Mogilka described two groups central to parish outreach: young adults and Latinos.

Older Catholics are used to their children not making church a part of their lives. According to survey data from Pew Research Center, "roughly two-thirds of Millennials (64%) attend worship services a few times a year or less often."

As a result, young adults and young parents who do visit parishes find there are few of their peers around to share their struggles or child-rearing stories with. Often, the authors said, parishes that attract young people break beyond parish boundaries and develop programs that attract young adults from all over.

But Jewell said the neighborhood parish can still reach young people. Those with effective social ministries, for example, often attract outsiders drawn to a parish that reaches out to the poor and is cognizant of neighborhood needs. Social ministry remains an attractive concept to young adults.

According to a report from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, among American Catholics born in 1982 or later, Hispanics or Latinos now make up the majority; that percentage will surely go up. The growth of Latino parishioners offers a challenge to Anglo Catholics and their parishes, the survey authors say.

Related: Isolated from communal prayer, Latino Catholics rediscover spiritual roots

Mogilka notes it is an issue affecting even regions not known for ethnic diversity. A previously struggling parish in Green Bay, for example, became one of the most dynamic in the diocese after opening itself up to Latinos, instituting a Spanish Mass and being welcoming to different cultures.

In all of this, the role of the pastor remains key, they said. Pastors often are coping with difficult finances, made more problematic as offertory collections dried up during the pandemic. About a quarter of all parishes operate at a loss, and about 8% need to be subsidized by their dioceses, said Mogilka.

Pastors, said Mogilka, need "the humility to realize that they don't have all the answers and all the gifts." Effective parishes, the authors write, institute leadership teams. The Lone Ranger approach, where a pastor makes all important decisions, is a relic not in tune with modern ministry.

Another factor in vibrant parishes is that women are welcomed in leadership roles. Eighty percent of parish staffs are women. As the number of ordained priests continues to decline, some dioceses are employing women as parish life

coordinators to administer parishes, many with success. There are 3,500 parishes across the country without a resident pastor, and women could be used effectively in administering those churches, said Mogilka.

The authors agreed that the lack of women in leadership roles in the church is a stumbling block for church participation among young adult Catholics. It's another reminder that parishes need to be alert to those who don't come in the door for Sunday Mass, but long for spiritual community.

"We need to pay attention to the voices who are not there," said Jewell.

[Peter Feuerherd is NCR news editor.]

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