News



The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden, New Jersey (Courtesy of Fr. John Fisher)

by Lexi McMenamin

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At the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden, New Jersey, June 14 was their first in-person Mass in 12 Sundays. Not only that, but they had their first in-

person funeral, for a beloved elderly member of the church, and their first in-person baptism, for a set of twins.

The Camden Diocese had suspended in-person services on March 17, after closing all schools in the diocese on March 14. State guidance for indoor services caps attendance at 100 people or 25% of the building's capacity, whichever is lower.

Fr. John Fisher said they didn't reach capacity during that first reopening Mass. "People are still waiting," he speculates.



The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden, New Jersey (Courtesy of Fr. John Fisher)

Parishioner Rose Keane was glad to be back. "I'm one of the senior citizens that they talk about," she said. "So I've been staying home." After weeks spent watching the Cathedral's livestreams online and televised Masses, making it in person was a welcome interruption to the mundanity of self-quarantine. According to Keane, there was plenty of space.

"I went to Mass all the time before, I'm not going to change anything unless it gets so bad with the virus coming back again," she said.

Parish council president Jonathan Latko doesn't think he'll attend Mass in person until September at the earliest. One of his children was diagnosed with leukemia this January, and due to her chemo schedule, the Latkos are following a strict regimen.

"That made quarantining a little bit easier because everybody was," he said. "But now that everybody's not, it makes it really difficult because, you know, grandparents, and going to church, seeing Fr. Fisher."

For now, there's no end in sight. "Without a vaccine, as long as she's doing chemotherapy, there's not really an answer," Latko says. "It's a real challenge."

While the cathedral was closed, both Latko and Keane were very impressed with the livestreaming options provided by the parish. The cathedral's sister parish, St. Joseph's Polish Roman Catholic Church, livestreamed their Masses before the diocese suspended services, and Latko hopes that the cathedral will consider continuing their livestreams.

"They did a really good job with camera angles and made it really feel interactive," Latko said.

Fisher doesn't expect the numbers to grow until September at the earliest. He credits digital platforms like FlockNote for making it easier to remotely connect with the parish.

"I don't know when malls and restaurants will fully open. I'm still waiting for a haircut, you know?" he said. "But there was definitive pleasure of being back today, and people distanced themselves in the pews."



Interior of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Camden, New Jersey (Courtesy of Fr. John Fisher)

While the church was closed, Fisher estimates the church received about 80% of the money they would have if it were open.

"We're an inner-city parish, and there were many benefactors from outside the parish who donated money, saying, 'I imagined your parish needs this,' " Fisher said. "But my spirits were buoyed with the number of people who would stop by and who would throw three or four weeks of envelopes and put it onto our porch where no one can get to it but the staff."

While the cathedral is following diocesan guidance, quandaries remain, like the risk of singing hymns. Weighing most heavily on Fisher's spirit, however, is a "one-two punch that no one could've expected" — the combination of reopening during a pandemic and the uprisings for racial justice sweeping the country.

National focus has come to Camden due to the discourse surrounding police defunding and abolition. Some have credited Camden with successfully disbanding its police force, while others point out that Camden is heavily surveilled and still disregards community input.

For Fisher's part, he's part of an informal network with Camden's chief of police and other local clergy, and is hopeful that things are changing locally. He imparted that need for change during that first in-person Mass: "I just said, everybody, here's the challenge. This needs to be prayed every day. I need to pray today until [racism] is no longer an issue."

[Lexi McMenamin is a reporter from Philadelphia who writes about politics, identity and activist movements. Follow them on Twitter @lexmcmenamin.]

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