Opinion

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San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy faces families during a livestream of Pentecost Sunday Mass May 31. (CNS/Courtesy of the San Diego Diocese/John Gastaldo)



by Christian Mocek

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When public Masses were no longer allowed, my family and I watched the livestream Mass for a few Sundays. We tried very hard to continue our weekly ritual of prayer and worship. Like many families, we created a small home altar. We lit a candle. We set out a statue of Mary. We stood. We knelt. We sang. We tried.

Our parishes tried, too. Priests who never heard of Facebook Live quickly learned how to livestream. They bought tripods and tried different camera angles. Some relied on their parishioners to lend expertise on video production. Everyone tried their best in a difficult time.

I know quite a few priests, so my Facebook feed was inundated with livestream Masses in the early days of the pandemic. Every day, I would scroll through and see priest after priest celebrating Mass in an empty church. I would watch them receive Communion, give a small teaching, and do all the rituals associated with the prayer. They were doing their best.

As the weeks went on, the experience of watching Mass got more difficult for my family. I would often miss the readings or homily because I was wrangling our toddler. In the end, Mass was more of a spectator sport than worship experience.

What became clear to us after weeks of watching online Mass was that it boiled down to watching someone else pray. We who sat in our living room weren't experiencing a sacrament. We were watching someone else experience it. And, at least for us, that was frustrating more than it was uplifting. So, we stopped watching virtual Mass and we haven't watched a Mass for months.

After further reflection, I've come to realize my problem was not with livestreamed Mass. I know many who love the experience, and it has served as a lifeline for their faith. I think it's an important ministry and it should continue.

My problem with virtual Mass was that it was the only form of ministry I was experiencing from my parish. And because it was the only form of ministry — it was wholly inadequate.

I have witnessed creativity and ingenuity in ministry during this difficult time. I saw parishes and priests who hosted a daily evening prayer, a weekly rosary, or weekly virtual Bible study. I've seen parishes offering virtual lectures and other learning opportunities. I know of priests and deacons who call their homebound parishioners

to check in.

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I think that is a good start to the new kind of community parishes are building. Because, we are, in fact, in the process of building a new kind of community. There will not be a return to the way things were. How could there be? The world has changed and so have we.

And moving forward, that kind of ingenuity and creativity is what I'm asking of our priests and parishes. In short, how can I pray with you? Because, I'm tired of watching you pray.

We know this pandemic is far from over and there are many, like my family, who will not see the inside of a church for many more months. Many are scared to go back, too at-risk, and it's precisely those people who need their parish more than ever.

So, our parishes must consider how to create virtual and in-person worship experiences that are communal and meaningful. What resources can we send to our parishioners to support their prayer at home? How can we support young families, our elders, our homebound in their experience of faith at home? What do we have to do to make human connections in a time when those things are in short supply?



Fr. Kristopher Fuchs, pastor of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Victoria, Texas, is seen in a livestream May 1, during the reconsecration of the U.S. to Mary. (CNS/The Catholic Lighthouse/Janet Jones)

As more return to Mass, I hope parishes and priests remember those of us on the outside who are desperately wishing we could be there in person. I hope they know that those at home want to feel like their presence in their community of faith still matters and that their presence in the pew is missed.

As we move forward, let's remember virtual ministry should not only be livestreamed Mass. I hope we expand and continue the good things that have been started. I hope we know that things will be different and must be different.

If we don't, we know what the consequences will be. They will be empty pews and empty churches because when push came to shove, the only thing many knew how to do was hide behind the altar.

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