

But in late summer, as restrictions on outdoor gatherings in Berkeley relaxed a bit, a small group began to meet, masked and distanced, in a nearby park to read and reflect on Scripture, and pray. (Unsplash/Hannah Busing)



by Julie Hanlon Rubio

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 11, 2021

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Editor's note: *A year after churches locked down because of the coronavirus pandemic, we asked two writers to reflect on why they have or have not returned to in-person church. Julie Hanlon Rubio sees herself fasting from in-person Mass for now, while Hosffman Ospino has "returned" to Mass celebrated outdoors, even in winter. What are you doing? Contribute to our reader response story here.*



(NCR, GSR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

In the beginning of the pandemic, people said, "Think of this time as a retreat." A year later, some are advising that we need not give up anything for Lent, because "we've been doing Lent all year." As a Catholic, I have thought about pandemic time as both retreat and fasting, though I have rarely set foot in an actual church, and have no plans to, for the moment.

Before last March, I had been a regular Mass-goer for nearly all of my adult life, though I did not get to this place in the usual way. When I was 9, my parents and their friends left the local parish where they were all very involved and started a church community, "Spes Nova," where they hoped to practice what Vatican II had promised. Gathering in my friends' living rooms for Mass, having Easter morning

liturgy on the beach, and listening from my bedroom to spirited discussion of the "liturgy committee" on a weekday night are among my earliest memories of church.

The community fell apart when I was in high school, but it shaped my positive view of Catholicism and fueled my participation in Christian Life Community in high school. On the first Sunday of my first year at Yale, I stepped into St. Thomas More chapel and never looked back. St. Aloysius in Washington, D.C., St. Ann's in Boston, St. Matthew's in Long Beach, California, St. Francis Xavier in St. Louis were all a part of my life.

Advertisement

This is not to say it was always easy. Occasionally, frustration with disappointing homilies, uninspiring music or the difficulties of keeping small children engaged kept me home, but generally I showed up. After moving to Berkeley in 2018, I began searching for a parish home, but the search was more difficult than I anticipated. I moved from parish to parish in the San Francisco Bay area, hoping to find one that really felt like home.

And then, all of the sudden, last March, church became less a place than a time. In northern California, there were very few possibilities for attending Mass in person this year, so I went back to churches I used to attend, visited the online Masses offered by priests I knew, while also joining livestream Masses for local parishes I had already been attending. Though I never understood Mass as an obligation, my lens broadened when it was no longer a requirement or even a live option. I was grateful for the chance to experience beautiful music, compelling preaching and carefully prepared liturgy.

But in late summer, as restrictions on outdoor gatherings in Berkeley relaxed a bit, a small group began to meet, masked and distanced, in a nearby park to read and reflect on Scripture, and pray. We shared the park with groups of college students, families, dog walkers and people who often sleep in or near the park. Sometimes there were baked goods to share after we were done praying. We marked birthdays, celebrated political victories, grieved illnesses and deaths, and supported each other through "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" of pandemic times. We called it "park church."

When a second lockdown was imposed in northern California in November, our small group decided to stop meeting. I tried to go back to Zoom Mass. Yet something troubled me now. What was I doing? Going to, watching, participating in, tuning into … What was the right verb? In what sense were we gathering, becoming the body of Christ, sharing Eucharist?



People spend time in conversation following an outdoor Mass celebrated at the home of Larry and Diane Kahlscheuer on Washington Island, Wisconsin, Sept. 6, 2020, during the pandemic. (CNS/The Compass/Sam Lucero)

Though not wanting to deny the value of these gatherings for many or dismiss their experience of real presence in virtual liturgy, for me it was becoming more difficult. When some churches in the area opened in limited ways, I thought about returning. But I felt uncomfortable both with participating in an indoor gathering and with sitting in my car in a parking lot watching Mass. I decided that extending the fasting from Mass might be appropriate. I made space on Sunday mornings for spiritual reading, yoga, journaling and listening to Catholic Women Preach.

Recently, restrictions were lifted and "park church" began to meet again. I found myself feeling deep gratitude for the opportunity to come together with other lay people, unbounded by the structures and limitations of a parish. In this space, I returned to my roots, sat on a blanket in the grass, unpacked Scripture and prayed with friends. "Park church" has been an essential part of the year-long retreat that would not have happened without COVID-19. It has kept me grounded, connected to God, and immersed in Catholic tradition and community, broadly conceived.

Eventually, the fasting will end. I miss the local and tangible parts of Mass: the feel of the pew, the smell of candles, the sound of harmony, the kiss of peace. I miss the crying babies, the earnest teens and the rock-solid elders. If the "real presence" of God exists both in the Eucharist and in the people who gather, I miss gathering with a people bigger than my own network in a place made for worship. I am beginning to think that my search for the perfect parish, real or virtual, is misguided. At any rate, it is making me tired. Soon, I am pretty sure that the longing for a people gathered in one place will take me to the church down the street. For now, I'm on retreat.



Jesuit Fr. John Piderit, San Francisco's archdiocesan vicar for administration, celebrates Mass simultaneously with three other priests on the feast of the

Assumption near the steps of the city's Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption Aug. 15, 2020. (CNS/Archdiocese of San Francisco/Dennis Callahan)

This story appears in the **Coronavirus: One year later** feature series. View the full series.

A version of this story appeared in the **April 2-15, 2021** print issue under the headline: 'Park church' replaces in-person and Zoom Masses.