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Parishioners walk on the snow-cleared parking lot of St. Patrick Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to assemble in winter for Mass outdoors. (Courtesy of St. Patrick Parish)



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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. Hosffman Ospino has "returned" to Mass celebrated outdoors, even in winter, while Julie Rubio sees herself fasting from in-person Mass for now. What are you doing? Contribute to our reader response story here.*



(NCR, GSR logo/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

We have marked a full year into the COVID-19 pandemic. It has not been an easy time for Catholic churches and other houses of worship. After closing their doors temporarily, most Catholic parishes have resumed operations, some with fewer services and many with fewer people as they adhere to local policies and recommendations from health care professionals.

As Catholics, we understand ourselves as a Eucharistic community. We sustain our spiritual lives with the Eucharist in which we acknowledge the real presence of the

risen Christ. Going to Mass is an important aspect of our religious identity. We gather at Mass as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ.

My faith community is St. Patrick Parish in Lawrence, Massachusetts, north of Boston. This has been my parish for two decades. There I am actively involved in ministry with my family. St. Patrick's is a trilingual parish serving Catholics in English, Spanish and Vietnamese. Lawrence is a largely Hispanic and Catholic city, with a sizable immigrant population. Lawrence has the lowest per capita income in the state of Massachusetts. Since the start of the pandemic, COVID-19 infections have been among the highest in the state.

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Tens of thousands of people living amid the challenges of poverty and marginalization in Lawrence, many of them first responders and workers without the privilege of doing their job from their homes, saw their lives further challenged by the pandemic. The pandemic has hit us all hard, but in those places where poverty is rampant, the effects have been more vicious.

Over the years, St. Patrick Parish has enjoyed strong Mass attendance. Families have developed a genuine love for the Eucharist, which in turn translates into generosity and the desire to live good Christian lives. In the many conversations I have had with Fr. Paul O'Brien, our parish pastor, he insists that despite the differences among the members of our community and the struggles that many of our people confront daily, the Eucharist is clearly what pulls us together and keeps us going. I believe him because I have witnessed it as a member of the community.

The pandemic placed us all at a crossroads. In March of 2020, all Masses in person were temporarily suspended. Our priests went on to livestream Masses in English and Spanish online. A few weeks later, the Boston Archdiocese provided instructions to celebrate Masses in churches, yet with limited numbers. Many people wanted to return to Mass, yet they feared for their wellbeing. My family and I discerned carefully whether we would go to Mass inside a church in a city with such a high number of infections. We considered simply following the Mass livestreamed online. Someone recommended going somewhere else, but St. Patrick's is our parish.





Left: People gather, some in chairs they brought, for Mass outdoors at St. Patrick Church in Lawrence, Massachusetts; right: Parish priests set up a makeshift altar on a tow truck to lead the community in eucharistic worship during the pandemic after in-person gatherings were allowed. (Courtesy of St. Patrick Parish)

After considering several possibilities, on Sunday, May 24, 2020, our parish resumed Sunday Masses in person. However, we did it in the parking lot of our parish, one Mass in English and one in Spanish. Our priests set up a makeshift altar on a tow truck and from there led the community in eucharistic worship. Hundreds of people attended. Everyone kept the appropriate physical distance. People were instructed to bring their chairs, if they so desired. Many did, others chose to remain standing. The idea may have sounded farfetched to some at first, perhaps desperate to others. For most, it was a way to partake of the Eucharist without placing any lives at risk.

Summer came, then the autumn. We celebrated first Communions, baptisms and confirmations in the parking lot. We also blessed quinceañeras and newborns. It never rained on Sunday mornings during this entire time! We could not believe it. November approached fast. The chill in the air announced that winter was near. In New England that meant snow and freezing temperatures.

Our pastoral team discussed whether it was time to go inside our church, with only a handful of parishioners, perhaps risking having someone spread the virus. Was it worth the risk? For months, we had learned about parishioners, friends, relatives and many others contracting the virus and dying. We decided to pull through the winter celebrating Mass in our parking lot.



A catechumens signs the Rite of Election at an outdoor Mass of St. Patrick Parish in Lawrence, Massachusetts (Courtesy of St. Patrick Parish)

Christmas Eve was really cold! Yet I will not forget people's sense of joy. Then came January and February. Snow and temperatures below freezing accompanied our days, but our community did not surrender. My children enjoyed putting their snow pants on to go to Mass. There were fewer people, of course, but still in the hundreds most Sundays. As the priests withstood the bitter wind on the tow truck, our eyes remained fixed in the Eucharist.

It's early in March, and we are still out there in the parking lot of our parish celebrating the Eucharist. It is getting warmer and more people are joining us again each Sunday. We have not been inside our church for more than a year. We miss it and look forward to return to it.

Something extraordinary happened this year, however. I know we are a stronger parish. In the midst of adversity, we turned to the Eucharist — again — as a source of hope and strength. Celebrating Mass in person this year in a way that is safe for all emboldened our faith. In doing this, our community manifested what I would call the four constitutive loves that make us who we are: We love the Eucharist. We love being in community. We love our parish. We love life.

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: Going to Mass during a pandemic: Parking lot church saves lives, emboldens faith.