News



A woman receives Communion at St. John the Baptist Church in Monroe, Michigan, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Courtesy of Detroit Catholic)



Mark Pattison

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The mere act of lifting the dispensation from the Sunday Mass obligation as the coronavirus pandemic eases won't be enough to get Catholics to come back to church, and some dioceses and Catholics are actively working to bring people back.

"Just opening our doors and waiting for folks to come is a failed strategy for generations, much less for today's culture," said Marcel LeJeune, founder and president of Catholic Missionary Disciples, in a July 12 email to Catholic News Service.

Research by the Catholic Leadership Institute, based in Pennsylvania, indicates that 25%-27% of Massgoing Catholics say they go to church "out of habit," according to institute president Dan Cellucci. Another 4%-6%, he added, call themselves "Catholics in name only." The research, Cellucci said, is based on 300,000 parishioners who speak one of 14 languages in 43 U.S. dioceses.

"If you were looking at that and the [Mass attendance] habit's been broken for 18 months in some parts of the country, I would posit that those people aren't going to come back if they [parishes] are not careful," Cellucci said. "If they worked through 18 months without their parish and didn't miss it, why would they put them back into their schedule?"

Parishes that didn't do anything to keep in touch with their parishioners are "most at risk" of membership drop-off, Cellucci told CNS in a July 14 phone interview.

The parishes "holding their own," he said, or have been thriving "are ones that have actually been in relationship with their people. They've made a deep bond of community and they work really hard at that. They check in with their parishioners, issue invitations — all the hallmarks of what we know to be practices of good evangelizing all the time."

Shouldn't the parishioners return on their own? "Theoretically, they should do that because of their Sunday obligation," Cellucci replied, "but that's not our mindset and we have to recognize that."

The issue has weighed on the mind of bishops and pastors for some time.

During the pandemic, "people were disconnected from one another," said Bishop William Koenig of Wilmington, Delaware. Koenig spoke in an interview with The Dialog, Wilmington's diocesan newspaper, prior to his July 13 installation as bishop.

"In coming together as a community of faith, we're also a community. It's not just vertical with God feeding that hunger, but it's also horizontal where we are with one another," Koenig said. "Certainly, praying is the highest way we come together as a community, but to continue to explore ways, whether it's prayer groups, support groups, working as a team for religious education ... those ways help us come together, too."

"When churches were closed, people got out of the social ritual practice of going to Mass on Sunday," Michael McCallion, a theology professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, said in an interview with Detroit Catholic, the online news outlet for the Detroit Archdiocese.

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"Especially for those on the fence — perhaps about a number of other issues that have nothing to do with the pandemic — that practice might not resume," McCallion added. "In the sociology of conversion, belief follows behavior. If we get out of the behavior, the belief fades as well."

He said, "What we need to do now more than ever is ramp up our hospitality and invite people to hang out with us at the parish. We can no longer wait for people; we need to go out and find them," McCallion said. "Each parish should have staff dedicated to a radical ministry of hospitality based on their own individual community with social events every week, not every month."

The Detroit Archdiocese's Department of Evangelization and Missionary Discipleship has assembled a "welcome-back playbook" for parishes to use. In the playbook are a sample script for calling parishioners and a sample welcome-back letter to send to

parishioners. "A letter from the pastor is one of the most essential messages to share with your parish community," the playbook said.

Other elements in the playbook include having the parish update its Mass and confession schedule on www.massfinder.org, and updating its profile on Google Business.

One teen in the archdiocese took a page from the playbook to arrange a monthly Teen Summer Mass Series at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral in Detroit, featuring monthly themed Masses.

Anthony Schena, a senior at De La Salle Collegiate High School in the Detroit suburb of Warren, Michigan, had noticed that at his home parish, there weren't a lot of people his age at Mass.

The cathedral Masses' readings and music will follow the theme, and after Mass there will be food and fellowship in the cathedral plaza.

"Teens like having fun and having food," Schena told Detroit Catholic. "There will be a snow cone truck and fellowship for one night, and we'll have games and fun get-togethers for a brief amount of time after each of the Masses."

"We're trying to have some fun, to make it something interesting for teens to bring them back to church," said Christine Broses, a pastoral associate at the cathedral. "With COVID, we noticed a lot of young people have not returned to church as fast as the older crowd has."



Anthony Schena, a senior at De La Salle Collegiate High School in Warren, Michigan, is pictured June 8 with Fr. J.J. Mech and Christine Broses, rector and pastoral associate of the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament. (CNS/Detroit Catholic/Dan Meloy)

In a September 2020 study from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 36% of Catholics ages 18-35 said they planned to attend Mass less frequently when stay-at-home orders were lifted.

Fr. Kevin Gill, pastor of Our Lady Star of the Sea Parish in Solomons, Maryland, said he installed a large "Welcome Home" banner at the front of the church because "I want people to have the sense as they pull into the parking lot that we are saying to them, 'You are home, and we are happy you are here.' "

"For several weeks our attendance has been almost at pre-COVID levels," he told the Catholic Standard, newspaper of the Washington Archdiocese. "We are at the very southern tip of Calvert County," a sparsely populated part of the archdiocese, "and it was much different here than in D.C."

Gill said that since Pentecost, the parish has reinstated hospitality after Masses.

For Msgr. Raymond East, pastor of St. Theresa of Avila Parish in Washington, as restrictions in the nation's capital were gradually eased or eliminated, "every week somebody new would come [back] and say, 'I have missed this very much.' They have been looking forward to coming back, and they are grateful to be back."

One benefit of offering Mass online, East said, is that "our audience has increased outside of the parish and we've had people from India, the Philippines, California [and] Europe watch our Masses."

He added since the church has opened up, "we are starting to get new neighbors and new members who discovered us online and are now coming in person to join the parish or at least give us a try."

The parish "will continue streaming" Masses, East said. But a cautionary note on that came from Tamra Hull Fromm, director of discipleship and an instructor at the Catholic Biblical School of Michigan.

"When it comes to Mass attendance, we need to ask where people were in terms of their understanding of the sacraments before the pandemic. Do they have an understanding of how the sacraments nourish the faith and, therefore, are part of the routine of nurturing that faith?" Fromm told Detroit Catholic. "If they don't understand the Eucharist, why would they come back?"

Fromm added, "Adoration on a screen can shift our minds and shift our theology. "We're disembodied with digital culture, making it tempting for some to move away from the celebration of the Mass and the importance of the Eucharist."

LeJeune, in an undated Catholic Missionary Disciples blog posting, said, "Catholic leaders need to stop asking, 'How do we get back to pre-COVID days?' ... Our job has never been to maintain institutions. It is to make disciples."

To do that, leaders need to envision "a post-COVID parish," he said. "The pandemic gives us a unique opportunity. Still, big changes need to be bathed in discernment and prayer."

He added, "Mission tells us why we exist. It is the engine which drives the car. We don't get anywhere without it."

Four of LeJeune's prescriptions for living in a post-pandemic parish are: "Let us love each other fully. Let us serve our communities. Let us fight for what is true and good," and "Let us not settle for what our parishes looked like in the past."

[Contributing to this story were Karla Dorweiler and Daniel Meloy in Detroit, Richard Szczepanowski in Washington and Joseph P. Owens in Wilmington.]