Opinion
Guest Voices



A priest wearing a protective face mask gives holy Communion to a man May 1, 2020, in a Catholic church in Kevelaer, Germany, during the first public Mass in the city since churches were closed because of the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS photo/Thilo Schmuelgen, Reuters)

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When everything shut down on March 13, 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it took a few months for all of us priests to get our bearings and begin to consider how we could do anything in our church that would be reverent, respectful, prayerful, healthy and safe. In our parish, members of the LGBTQ+ community answered that call for help.

I am the pastor of a midsized parish in the Chicago Archdiocese. When we received the first of many communiques from the archdiocese on the necessary steps we would have to take to reopen for services, I put out a general call for volunteers and began to strategize how we would prepare our church building.

A COVID team had to be formed, with subgroups responsible for various parts of the now-necessary activities. These became our newest parish ministries. We needed greeters who would check people in, take temperatures and help sanitize hands. They also had to lead people to their seats in the pews, which were blocked off for spatial distancing. They would direct people at Communion time on how to get to the much fewer distribution stations and again have them sanitize their hands. And after each and every service, we needed volunteers to clean and sanitize all the pews and other surfaces anyone may have touched. To sum up, we needed a lot of people, right away!

We were very fortunate and were able to submit our plan to the archdiocese and receive the required certification to reopen within days. The COVID team met weekly, first to plan how everything should work, then to check on how it was actually working, tweaking things here and there as we discovered problems or other ways of doing things. And for every Mass, funeral, wedding or other service, the COVID team organized the needed volunteers to show up, 20 minutes early, to be sure they were ready to keep everyone healthy and safe.

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In the following 12 months, after hundreds and hundreds of services — which also includes livestream services on Sunday and weekly parish school (livestreamed) liturgies — we had only two cases that required us to report a possible exposure to the virus. The first was a family guest at one of the weekend Masses at which the children whose First Communions had been canceled were now celebrating that

sacrament. The guest discovered he/she/they had COVID a few days later. We contacted the proper authorities, who determined the information had come too late to make a difference—so no contact tracing was done. The second was at a daily Mass when one of our greeters found out, after daily morning Mass, that he/she/they also had COVID. We again notified the proper authorities and then contact-traced all those who had been at Mass that morning, with no further infections discovered. To the best of our knowledge, in all those months no one has contracted COVID from anyone else in our church.

This is a source of pride for the parish and all the volunteers who made it possible. I am hopeful this was also the experience of many, many churches throughout the world.

But I am writing about this for one other reason. Our parish is in an area of the city known for its progressive stance on many issues. And it has prided itself on its openness to welcoming all members of the neighborhood and the parish community. We are a diverse lot, with longtime parishioners who grew up here and then raised their own children and now enjoy visits from their grandchildren. We also have many immigrants from different parts of the world, including refugees that the parish ministers to in an amazing fashion. And we have a significant population of LGBTQ+ parishioners who have always been welcomed and volunteer in liturgical, educational and outreach ministries.

> The only reason we had those sufficient volunteers for the COVID protocols was because, first and foremost, our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters stepped forward and did the work.
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During this time of extraordinary service by members of the LGBTQ+ community, one of the Vatican congregations released a statement saying that the church could not now and could not ever "bless" the relationship of any same-sex couple. I wrote an article at the time and sent it to parishioners, expressing my utter dismay at the ignorance and bigotry that statement exhibited.

In my many decades as a priest, I have never received so many letters and emails of thanks for any other article. Nor have I ever written anything that could be

considered controversial and not received at least one letter or email that took me to task. In this case, however, every single respondent thanked me. And, more importantly, many of them relayed stories of their own children or other relatives who are gay or lesbian and expressed confusion and anger at how the church treats them.

Here is my point. I believe the pandemic was in this one way an extraordinary gift to the world. Not the sickness and death — that was and continues to be horrible and sometimes seems even Godforsaken. But it was a full-stop for a world so busy about so many things that we often forget what matters most–one another. In this sense, COVID 19 was and could continue to be a profound spiritual moment for all the world's inhabitants. For a long time, we will remember that — no matter what we thought before — we now know for sure we are not in charge. That knowledge is both frightening and reassuring. We belong to a universe created by God. As Pope Francis has so beautifully reminded us in his encyclical *Laudato Si,* we are all responsible for each other and for our planet.

In my heart of hearts, I would love to see a statement of apology for that hateful statement about same-sex blessings. But short of that, I can at least give public credit to the LGBTQ+ members of our parish whose faith-filled service made possible our reopening and regular schedule of services.

I stand in awe and respect that these women and men have remained in the church — not only remained but continued to minister to all the members of our parish. Quite literally, without them we would not have reopened for Mass when we did. Nor would we have had the confidence that we could easily welcome every grieving family to a funeral, and every joyful bride and groom for their wedding, and every beaming young family to their child's baptism.

I'd like to encourage all those in Vatican offices, and all who continue to hold people who are different from them in sexual orientation in thinly veiled contempt, to consider this: We are supposed to be ambassadors of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He only gave us two commandments: that we love God with all our minds and all our hearts and all our souls, and that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

This same Jesus never mentioned any discrimination based upon sexual orientation. Never. As we sing in the famous hymn that is still one of my favorites: People will know we are Christians by our love. By our love.