

What We Learned During the Pandemic

On Facebook, the noted catechist, Joe Poprocki, asked if there were things that we learned about parish and church during the pandemic. Great question!

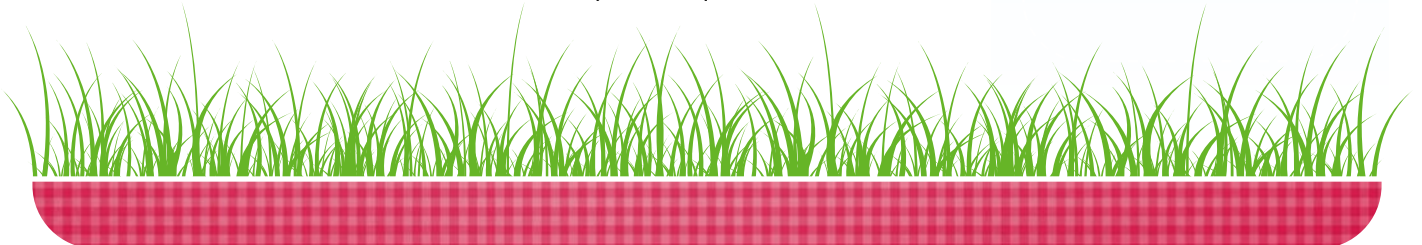
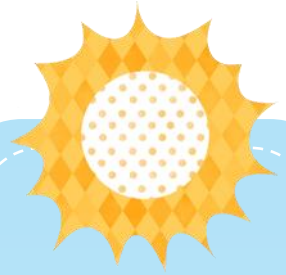
Of course, this past very-long year has been a non-stop learning experience as we had to adjust to evolving patterns of infection and precautions. We opened doors to mostly-empty churches where a small percentage of our pre-covid population would assemble, often without any of the music that has accompanied our Masses since 1965. Clergy and lay-ministers had to re-check the procedures to make sure everyone was on the same page and everyone felt safe.

But some other patterns emerged well. It's as if some nefarious force decided to make us part of a terrible thought experiment: let's take away the very seams that tie Catholics together, from the Eucharist to faith formation, and see what is left. We had every right to feel like Job, the old testament figure who lost everything important to him, as the Satan tempts him: "Let's see if he will give up faith now." Job sits on the trash heap facing the deepest questions. We had to sit on the heap of endless fears and questions facing, in our day, our deepest questions.

Who was safe and who wasn't? How can seemingly healthy people be the one's spreading the virus most of all? When will we be able to see grandparents? Visit nursing homes? Gather for a family celebration? Who will be safe after Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or New Years? What are the risks if I travel? Who will I infect? Who will infect me?

Most of us are more than ready to put this Job-like test to an end. We want to get on with life; but we also wonder if the life we knew will ever return. We want to turn the clock back 15 months, when we lived relatively care-free. Who can blame us?

But before we do that, I'd like to answer Joe Poprocki's question with



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some observations of things we've learned during the pandemic—things that we should not forget as we think about parishes and Church in a world with diminishing covid exposure. What are these things?

I think we learned some essential ways of presence because of the pandemic.

We need to keep these up, not as alternatives to presence but as ways of augmenting presence. Not being able to gather or to see each other, Zoom, Cisco, Teams, and other Internet programs allowed us to experience other ways of contact. These modes of augmented and extended presence should not be forgotten.

First among these is live-streaming the Eucharist and other parish events such as talks and prayer services.

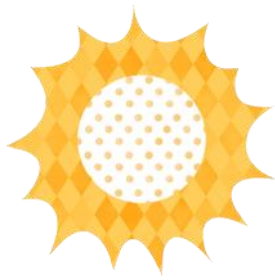
In spite of many quite legitimate questions about worship-at-a-distance, livestreaming made some level of faith experience accessible to many. Not only were a large percentage of the "faithful regulars" about to see their familiar sanctuaries and be fed by familiar ministers. Significantly, also many who do not usually walk up to a church door on Sunday (or otherwise) were able to experience this experimental version of Catholic liturgy. In a world more likely to depend on virtual interaction and presence in the future, we should not scorn the millions who peeked into church experience electronically during this past year. This showed that many folks still maintain some connection and also that parishes wanted to reach out. No one will argue that spiritual communion surpasses the experience of eating the food Jesus consecrates for us; but, in the end, spiritual communion is better than nothing.

Secondly, we saw activity among parents with their children being explicitly recognized and incorporated into our faith formation efforts.

All these years we have been wringing our hands wondering how to get parents involved. This pandemic meant that this questions could no longer be theoretical. Parents had to be involved (just as



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they were for the rest of their children's virtual education) through virtual classes, home activities, and various

assignments. This welcome direction needs to be increased. Faith formation must primarily be in our homes. This is the only way younger generations will come to see faith as something part of everyday life rather than an added set of classes they are forced to take until they "graduate." Catechetical publishers often stepped up to the plate, providing formats for this home-based learning.

Third, we saw lay people take initiatives in prayer, witness, and leadership.

The whole vision of Vatican II of a church of people baptized into Christ and empowered by the Spirit—as vision that still battles with the pre-Vatican II default of going to church and getting what we need from "Father" or "Sister"—now had to show its mettle. People had to pray at home, form virtual prayer or faith-sharing groups, and exercise their faith in their everyday lives. Parishes must further this as much as possible. Parishes must re-emphasize the "communio" vision of church in which all of us, with our different callings and gifts, have a role in building up the Body of Christ, in serving the furtherance of the Kingdom of God. Unless Catholic laity move beyond a generally passive role of "going to church" and into a more active role of "being

church," we will not grow beyond the institutional images that unfortunately serve more as straightjackets than cocoons.

Fourth, we saw parish renewals happen virtually or over livestream.

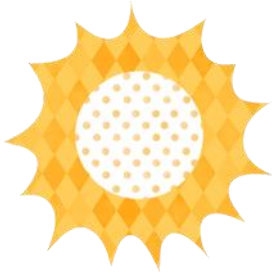
This kind of initiative, coupled with "small group" or "breakout rooms," can increase a broad sense of involvement in discipleship. Now we know that parish retreats and missions can, in addition to taking place in churches, also happen for people on their laptops or cellphones. This means that extraordinary renewal efforts can be afforded parishioners (think of seniors or homebound people who find it hard to do things at night or even get out of house) but, even more, parishioners can send links to non-parishioners or Catholics who are very active in their faith. Voila—a greater chance for evangelization and mission for parishes today!

Fifth, we learned that parishes need to consciously point out elements of discipleship (encounter, prayer, Scripture, Sacrament, service and community) and use these as the points of growth for future Catholic life.

Parishes need to invite Catholics to appropriate the personal and communal dynamics of discipleship which will be the framework that tomorrow's Church will need to survive, to grow, and to thrive. It's no longer "I'm a parishioner so I go to church," but "I'm a Catholic disciple who has made relationship to Jesus and his people in the Spirit essential to my self-understanding." The term "new evangelization" has had quite a roller-



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coaster history since it began to be used in 1983. But certainly it now is clear that “new evangelization” means a conscious living as Catholic disciples, moving well beyond the exterior markers of identity to an interior-and-exterior appropriate of faith as a vibrant way of life. The dynamics of conversion and personal commitment, implicit in just about everything Catholics do as part of their faith, now must be explicitly underlined and emphasized. Modern life has made “automatic Church” more and more impossible. Only a sense of discipleship, appropriated in a personal way, can begin to bring what modernity can easily take away.

Many thanks to people who have raised questions about the effects of this pandemic. Their questions have given us much to ponder and preserve.

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