

# **REPORTS FROM OUR PRIESTS ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

In late September, we asked all priests in our archdiocese to prepare a report reflecting on how their ministries were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked them to describe how the pandemic was handled in their parishes, quasi-parishes and mission churches. As well, we asked how the pandemic affected their duties and life as a priest, and what pastoral plans related to the pandemic are being prepared as we approach a second year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are now compiling these reports in hopes for greater guidance and insights into our own protocols as an archdiocese. Moving forward, we hope this report will provide us with more intimate insights into how this pandemic effected the lives of our priests and parishioners, and how we can address the many challenges and lessons that have come from this experience.

Below is a summary based off of points made in each of these reports. We feel it is important to share this document with our faithful, to help them understand the trials, difficulties and blessings their priests and pastors have faced during this pandemic.

## **SUMMARY OF REPORTS:**

The COVID-19 pandemic was definitely a disruptive and difficult experience for our pastors. When the celebration of public Mass was suspended around Lent of 2020, many priests made an intentional effort to keep the churches open to the public and also offer adoration at the times usually scheduled for public Mass. Some parishioners used this opportunity to still come to the church for private prayer. Other priests who were in very small parish communities with outbreaks kept their churches closed, and often mission churches located in First Nations communities were placed on strict lockdowns. These priests had little choice than to be “locked in the house,” and it was a very distressing time for their ministry.

When public Mass did return, having to restrict capacity and modify certain aspects of the liturgy to be in accord with safety protocols created many challenges. Some priests voiced that it had a negative impact on the faith life of many, reducing participation in Mass, and many people lost their preferred way of receiving the sacraments or expressing themselves at Mass. Many priests dealt with capacity limits by increasing the number of Sunday Masses, sometimes by 2 or 3, so to accompany as many people as possible. Despite these difficulties, priests stated that parishioners overall were very cooperative and understanding when it came to adjusting to these changes and protocols. The priests

saw how the Church remained an important and regenerative place for people during this distressing situation.

Common to our priests were new challenges in maintaining social relationships and continuing meetings and programs with parishioners. Most priests made more time to call parishioners by phone, and some found technological alternatives with apps like Zoom to continue council meetings or weekly prayer meetings, and this provided some sense of normalcy and connection - especially in the major lockdown of early 2020. These efforts continue today. One of our pastors is currently organizing a communications outreach committee to develop better ways and strategies to reach out to parishioners if restrictions continue or worsen in the future.

Still, social life with parishioners did suffer by the inability to meet in person, visit homes, etc. Important priestly duties, such as outreach to the sick, elderly and dying, were greatly curtailed at times. Sometimes sacraments were hindered or postponed, including baptisms, weddings and anointing of the sick.

Livestreaming Mass was another helpful tool, providing a way to reach many more people and create some sense of spiritual sustenance. For parishes that did not livestream their own Mass, people were directed to watch Mass on EWTN or other providers, especially during Easter of 2020. However, several priests voiced concern that livestreaming Mass may have a negative impact in creating a degree of "laziness" and unwillingness to go to Mass in person. With the easing of restrictions, some priests have noticed that many common church goers are no longer attending Mass, while others hope that the restrictions have also increased a longing for the Church in some people. The suggestion was made in these reports to seek ways to encourage Mass attendance whenever restrictions lessen, and to also find new ways to bring the Church "beyond its walls" and outward to the people.

Amongst the parishioners, several priests noticed divisions and tensions, with differing opinions on the necessity or severity of restrictions, especially mask mandates, and a sense of animosity among the vaccinated and unvaccinated. Priests also noticed people were suffering in their private lives as well, with loneliness, uncertainty about employment, and other factors. Many priests also voiced this sense of loneliness, especially at times when they had to celebrate Mass alone or they could no longer visit parishioners or the local Catholic schools. One priest described having to preach to empty pews feeling like "a loss of identity". But holding onto God and maintaining a strong prayer life is a crucial source of healing and perseverance during these times.

The priests have had to accommodate and change their ministries in many ways throughout these past two years, but they have also never abandoned hope in finding alternative ways to perform their duties or to seek out a silver lining amidst this once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.