

Hard Work, Dedication Ensure Saint Joe's Goes on through Trying Times

I don't know about you, but for me, the coronavirus certainly has been mentally challenging to deal with these past five months.

At Easter during the triduum, I offered Mass in a surreal environment, alone with a few people on the holiest days on our calendar. Then we had ongoing Mass cancellations where I was offering Mass alone with a few staff members. Then the school closed early for the year.

Here we are, five months and change since the first cancellations began. Some things are back such as weekend Masses. But it's still not the same. Admittedly, I find it hard saying Mass and looking at a sea of masks covering faces rather than seeing the actual faces of the people in the congregation; not having much singing with the hymnals still in a separate room, and giving Communion to people only to have them be rushed from the building after Mass with not much socializing indoors and no Sunday doughnuts or many conversations in the narthex. We have funerals again too but still aren't having the lunches which mean so much to people. And we have some events for the Harvest Festival but no sit down, face-to-face dinner with people to be a part of or a band to listen and dance to.

For me personally, the hardest thing with the virus is there is no real escape. I've been blessed with good health, but you turn on the TV and there are empty sporting venues. Our beloved State Fair, a high point of the year for me, is shut down. And international travel is still shut down. And go indoor anywhere and you have seas of faceless people covered in masks. I spend most of my spare time getting out into nature which helps, and of course with my golden retriever friend who thankfully never, ever social distances. (Boy I am sick of that term!).

I long for hearing the crowds at the games again, crossing the Canadian border again, or hearing people laugh at a movie and needling Packer fans on doughnut Sundays again. I hope that day is coming.

But for all the challenges we face, I have to tell you what has been incredible is the dedication of the staff of Saint Joseph's who "keep on truckin'" during these past few months. Thanks to them, we've been able to do so much despite losing so much.

There's Bridget Samson, who has been working hard to have an online portion for our Harvest Festival and working with volunteers to come up with ideas to keep people connected.

There's Sheila Swift, who has been working with our school coordinating a "pop up" online auction. www.charityauction.bid/stjoesauction2020

There's Pat Archer and our amazing maintenance team who have really gone the extra mile making sure the church is kept clean and sanitized, spraying it down after the

Masses and making sure hand sanitizer is out and other cleaning products are in stock for us.

There's Scott Kieffer and Kayla Rooney, our faith formation team. Kayla joined by a number of volunteers held a Vacation Bible School earlier this month, which was so great for kids to grow in their faith but also get out for a summer activity. She's also been working hard as we prepare for First Communion and Confirmation this fall. Scott's been facilitating ongoing youth programs since Covid began, and recently has been able to do more on-site activities in summer, and this weekend had a confirmation retreat. Thanks to them, so many of our kids and youth have had faith formation opportunities despite covid impacting many traditional faith formation events.

There's Kelly Roche, who we are so blessed to have as our principal. Kelly has been working hard with a dedicated committee to come up with a re-opening plan. We want to do all we can to be ready for September so kids can come to school in a safe environment where they can learn. This summer she's fielded countless phone calls and emails, given numerous tours, and done an amazing job doing all she can to provide for a safe learning environment for our school kids. We are so blessed to have her serving our school.

And then there are the volunteers such as those on our video ministry team, parish council, trustees, and school reopening committee who have worked so hard too to keep our parish moving forward.

There are many more people to thank, but the point is while this is a trying time for us all, we also have so much to be thankful for in that we can offer Mass, open our school, and move forward. This is not an easy time on anyone, but having the opportunity to pray together, and receive the Eucharist has been so important for us all. Thank *you* for your continued support of our parish through your prayers, financial support, and most of all for living out your faith at Saint Joseph's.

One last thought as we move forward, everything is so political these days, and there is so much division, including over how to respond to the virus. It is important to bear in mind that as we re-open both the school and the church, we are bound by certain regulations due to the governor's executive orders and the policies of the archdiocese. These change as the virus drags on, so we stay current and do our best. Some will want more restrictions, some less, but please bear in mind that re-opening plans are done in accordance with these rules and those of the archbishop. For instance, with respect to masks, I would not mandate them as pastor, and prefer to leave that up to the individual, but the governor, acting with executive power, has mandated them, and this also applies to houses of worship. There are signs up encouraging mask use too, and I notice the vast majority of folks do wear masks following that order. However, we are not going to ask people for doctor's notes or have ushers serve as the mask police, as you are also not to ask people about any medical condition, and I've also heard from folks who have a breathing condition, and another person contacted me about a friend who was disabled asking if he could come here without a mask as he said he was told

to leave another parish Mass because he did not wear one. If that's true, that is pretty sad. The point is this: we are divided enough, so let's not look at those wearing masks as being a hypochondriac virtue-signaler, and those not wearing them as wanting to intentionally get someone sick. Let's be welcoming to all people, but also be aware there are certain things we're asked to do in this time we might not like, from the masks to how we receive Communion to the lack of parish events, that we do in the name of safety. I also encourage people to contact their elected officials to express their opinions on Covid-related policies. As we move forward, we can certainly have debate and discussion on these things which we should do in the political sphere. And by all means write the Archbishop if you have ideas or suggestions on policies for the archdiocese. I can say I appreciate the hard work the archdiocese has done and the leadership of our Archbishop, who is largely responsible for us having public Masses again.

If you do have a question or concern though about the church or school or anything related to what we are doing at the parish level, be it on Covid or anything else, I'd ask you please first call us or write us. You can reach any staff person by going to our website where you'll find our numbers and email addresses and we'll respond to you promptly.

We are getting there, but this is not a "new normal." I hope and pray every day for a way through Covid so the masks are gone, people are singing again, and most importantly people are living again as we should be, namely as a community who talks and socializes not online, but face to face over a meal, a doughnut, a song. As one parishioner put it to me, being at Saint Joe's is like being in a small town, and there is a family aspect to our parish. We love and support one another, and we've been doing that through Covid. But we also need to get back to the community and social aspects of both our worship and parish life. We'll get there, but until then, thank you and please know how hard so many have worked in these challenging times to keep us moving forward. Truly, we are Saint Joe's.

God bless,

Fr. Paul