



Renew My Church: Operations Transition (OT)

Perspective on our current situation, *Ross Aymami*

From Crisis Comes Opportunity...

As someone who was born and raised in New Orleans, I've got a lot of experience in quarantined situations. During any hurricane threat to the city, local and state authorities would place residents and businesses on "lockdown" for the overall safety and welfare of everyone. The panic and hysteria displayed by people at grocery stores are common because fear and uncertainty breed anxiety and illogical behavior. But, much like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a lot of good can blossom from the challenge before us.

After Hurricane Katrina, the Catholic Church, the largest denomination in the New Orleans area, faced unique challenges. Before Katrina, the Archdiocese of New Orleans had 480,000 members out of a total population of 1.4 million and 142 churches in eight parishes. In addition, the church's parochial school system served approximately 50,000 students in over 100 schools, roughly the same size as the city's public-school system. The losses suffered by the Archdiocese were staggering. The storm damaged 1,274 buildings owned by the Church; 864 buildings had severe wind damage and 397 had severe flood damage. The Church estimated the total loss at \$250 million.

However, as disaster struck, priests ministered to those in need. Two priests comforted people stranded in the Superdome after the storm, three others ministered to storm victims at Louis Armstrong International Airport where the sick were being treated, and two more worked at local hospitals under terrible conditions and were among the last to leave, nearly a week after the storm struck. Priests ministered to rescue workers and to the traumatized people they rescued, while others gave succor to the families of policemen, firefighters, and rescue workers who were living on boats on the Mississippi River.¹

The Archdiocese planned "to close damaged churches, dissolve struggling parishes and re-assign priests" as it struggled to cope with \$84 million in uninsured losses from the storm. One of the churches set to close was St. Augustine parish in the Treme neighborhood.

Ironically, Hurricane Katrina set in motion a revitalization of St. Augustine. Unlike many churches in the city, St. Augustine suffered relatively little damage and quickly resumed its services. The parish's celebration of New Orleans' history and culture took on an added resonance after the storm; attendance at Mass began to climb, as did the weekly collection, and the pastor celebrated the emergence of what he called the "Katrina congregation." The Church also provided relief to the community; it operated a free food pantry, feeding a hundred people every day, a clothing distribution center, and a counseling center.²

Although the coronavirus pandemic is not a disaster that will crumble our church buildings and cause millions in extra structural damage, it has already caused a shift in how we operate our daily lives – not only as individuals but also as a Catholic faith. People are working remotely, meetings are being conducted via telecommunication startups – even masses are being celebrated digitally with YouTube and Facebook live streaming.

¹ *Clarion Herald*, August 18, 2007; *Times Picayune*, November 3, 2005.

² *Louisiana Weekly*, June 4-10, 2007



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The Archdiocese of Chicago designed Renew My Church to address the increased secularization of our culture in a set of initiatives designed to both introduce people who have no familiarity with the Christian faith into a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ, as well as deepen and strengthen the discipleship of existing Catholics so that they are able to evangelize the world through an inspiring witness in their communities.³

One of these initiatives is to enhance “Parish Vitality” by creating new models of parish life and operations to better support and fund the vital ministries that lead to spiritual growth. There is no better time than the current pandemic crisis to embrace modern society in a digital world and use the fruits of technology to spread the Gospel. Let’s build friendly and engaging websites, let’s create a mobile presence, and let’s become social media “rock stars;” it’s time to become Catholic “influencers” to promote our Catholic identity to attract new members, engage with our people to share our sacramentality, our charitable works to community, our respect for human life, and our reverence for Scripture and Tradition with an attitude of faith and hope.

It is extremely important to use our social media outlets to invite people to Mass, adoration, confession and Catholic events, but we can’t only use our social media in this way. Rather, we must acknowledge that our Facebook friends, or the accounts following our parish’s Twitter account, are communities themselves.⁴

That means we must use social media to minister to and feed these communities by offering them content that will help them encounter Jesus in some way. Whether it is an inspiring or comforting quote from Scripture, live streaming Masses or events, or catechetical videos that share the richness of our Catholic tradition, we need to offer something of substance to our friends and followers.

If we share meaningful content, we can use social media to bring people into an encounter with Christ every single day.

Meaningful content is two things: authentic and vulnerable. In a world where lives are lived on social media, where we are bombarded with advertisements and noise, people crave authenticity. They desire something stable, something comforting and something that helps them make sense of their crazy lives. That something is actually someone, and his name is Jesus Christ.

Let’s use this virus to make our Catholic Church go “viral” – let’s make disciples, build communities and inspire witness.

³ <https://www.renewmychurch.org/mission/strategic-initiatives>

⁴ John Grosso, Director of Digital Media – Diocese of Bridgeport, CT