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Coronavirus restrictions could renew appreciation for community, faith

By Carol Zimmermann [Catholic News Service](#)

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CNS photo/courtesy Archdiocese of Baltimore
Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori celebrates a private March 15, 2020, Mass in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Baltimore that was livestreamed for viewers. The archbishop canceled all public Masses in the archdiocese amid coronavirus concerns effective March 14. (CNS photo/courtesy Archdiocese of Baltimore) See [MASSES-SUSPENDED-PANDEMIC](#) and [CORONAVIRUS-COMMUNITY-FAITH](#) March 18, 2020.

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- During the coronavirus pandemic, life as most people have known it, including parish life, has come to a halt.

But despite closed churches, canceled parish gatherings and limited outreach, many church leaders are emphasizing that Catholics can take this time of recommended isolation and pause of normal and often-very-busy routines to strengthen their personal faith and reinforce bonds with families, neighbors and the church at large.

Many Catholics are relying on technology to tap into spiritual resources such as livestreamed Masses, Bible readings and prayers; they're also reaching out to others and staying connected through social media, emails or video conference calls.

"The internet is the blessing of all blessings" right now, said Sister Susan Francois, an assistant congregation leader for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, who has been having Zoom video conference meetings with team members across the country and in other parts of the world.

And even social media, which does not always have a spiritual side, is reflecting one now as people turn to parish Facebook pages for information, to YouTube for online Masses and are searching the internet for advice on how to make a spiritual communion. Twitter also has been a platform where church leaders and everyday Catholics have voiced concern but also hope during the uncertainty of this pandemic.

For example, a March 18 tweet by Bishop Mario Grech of Gozo, Malta, pro-secretary-general of the Synod of Bishops, said: "We are going through the 'dark night of the soul' -- the meaning we had given to lot of things is vanishing. Yet the bright side of this experience is that it can offer us a deeper sense of purpose and connectedness."

Father Paul Keller, a Claretian Missionary priest currently serving at St. Paul Catholic Newman Center Parish in Fresno, California, similarly spoke of a spiritual side to this difficult time. He said the current forced period of isolation provides a time for solitary prayer "that we don't have time to do in the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives."

He pointed out that people can take going to Mass for granted, but now this "fast from the Eucharist and the sacraments can increase our longing" for them, he told Catholic News Service March 17.

The priest also hoped many would embrace this time to connect as a community even by phone, which is one thing the young adults in his parish are doing: calling every parishioner to see how they are doing and if they need anything.

This reaching out to others, more than people might usually do, "can also help those who might need more care or resources but hadn't asked for it," said Dominican Brother Ignatius Perkins, director of provincial administration for the Dominican Friars-Province of St. Joseph in New York.

He called this time a "defining moment for the church and for each of us to reach out to the lost, the last and the least among us, but most especially the abandoned, the unloved, and those who have no place to lay their head at night."

Mercy Sister Kathleen Ann Kolb, coordinator of health and wellness for the Sisters of Mercy in the New York and Pennsylvania area, similarly said she hoped the current health crisis would "build community in small areas but also in the global community," noting how in difficult times, people tend to band together.

Of course, community is something experienced on the parish level at church gatherings that are now canceled, and ultimately at Mass, but most dioceses in the U.S. are no longer having public Masses as of March 18, which is a loss for many Catholics across the country.

Paulist Father Larry Rice, director of the University Catholic Center at the University of Texas at Austin, said he understands this disappointment not only because of the importance of Mass but also because participating in it has been "emphasized for centuries."

He said the current separation might help Catholics "come to a deeper appreciation that we are the Body of Christ together, and for each other, even when we are not able to gather for worship."

For now, he added, promoting the common good for all our community paradoxically means staying home.

Washington Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, in a column for the March 19 issue of the Catholic Standard, the archdiocesan newspaper, echoed the belief this could be a time of grace.

"I honestly never dreamed I would live in a moment where the same disquieting circumstances that compel us as Catholics to want to gather more frequently in worship, prayer and solidarity would also prevent us from being able to do so securely."

But the archbishop added: "If we are open, God will use this moment to bring our hearts closer to him and more firmly in union with one another."

He said that during this time of separation, Catholics should "value the gift of assembled common prayer even more" and come to a deeper understanding that what Catholics share is "something more profound and enduring than mere physical proximity."

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