

It Felt Like the Doors Were Being Shut

Following his Disaster Emergency declaration on March 6 due to the coronavirus disease pandemic, Governor Wolf, on March 16, ordered a shutdown of all nonessential businesses statewide in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. The governor also urged people to stay at home and issued guidelines for public gatherings, including worship. Religious leaders were encouraged to “exercise discretion to mitigate the spread of illness.” To comply with the governor’s declaration, all statewide Catholic bishops dispensed the obligation to attend Sunday Mass on March 12. Governor Wolf issued a stay-at-home order on March 23 for seven counties, including Chester. This order was extended statewide on April 1. (The order was lifted when counties entered the Yellow Phase.) But, in response to the growing concern about the spread of coronavirus, the decision to suspend public Masses had already been taken.

In solidarity with the other Pennsylvania bishops, Archbishop Perez announced on March 17 the suspension of all public Masses in the Archdiocese, for over 200 churches and over 1 million Catholics, beginning March 18. For the first time in the commonwealth’s history, all houses of worship were closed to public worship. As one ABVM parishioner observed, “Before this,” {*COVID-19*}, “churches stayed open even during the plague!”

In his announcement, the archbishop emphasized, “...I want to be very clear that the Catholic Church in Philadelphia is not closing down. It is not disappearing and it will not abandon you. Time and again as our history has proven the Church has risen to meet great challenges and provide a beacon of hope and light.”

Although church buildings (including ABVM) would remain open for private prayer at their pastors’ discretion, it felt to many as if the doors were being shut because public worship and the liturgy would not be available. News of the pandemic caused fear and uncertainty because so little was known about the COVID-19 virus except that, almost overnight, it was upending life as we knew it. In previous crises, people could turn to the Church for strength and consolation. Would the Church be able to continue its mission as Archbishop Perez had promised? How would it do so in the midst of the pandemic? Across the entire commonwealth, worship at

churches, temples, and mosques stopped, and no one knew when and how they would begin again.

ABVM was immediately impacted: public celebration of Mass, access to the sacraments, visitation of the sick, ABVM School classes and CYFF classes, CYO activities as well as the work of ministries and parish organizations stopped. However, the church building remained open for private prayer and Father Scott remained available for emergencies. Over the next weeks, Father Scott—together with the parish and school staff, the parish ministries, and the Parish and Finance Councils—assessed and responded to the situation. One member of the Liturgy Committee remembers thinking “We had to stop doing what we were doing and figure out what we could do.” Another member recalls that while no one was surprised by the decision to close the churches, as some other dioceses had already done, it was still a shock when it finally happened. “I expected the closing to be 2-3 weeks. I was shocked at how long we stayed closed.”

We Need a Connection Back

During this unprecedented shutdown, it was more critical than ever to find ways of keeping the parish connected. Since public worship was curtailed and ABVM School and CYFF classes suspended, alternative ways of communication were essential, given the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic. As reported in the media, projections of the pandemic’s impact and the extent and duration of the shutdown changed almost weekly. Government’s response was also evolving as new health measures and restrictions were announced.

On March 28, the parish website announced that confessions would resume with the additional precautions required to minimize spread of the virus.

On April 2, Father Scott posted a letter to parishioners on the parish website. He wrote: “Dear Parishioners, the image of Pope Francis sitting alone...in a normally bustling St. Peter’s Square...symbolizes the reality for all the churches. They are empty. Unfortunately, out of love and concern for one another, we cannot gather together for public worship until the pandemic passes.” While this first post acknowledged the situation that required the shutdown, a steady

stream of website posts full of hopeful messages followed in the weeks after: a Palm Sunday blessing and an invitation for a drive-through pickup of blessed palms; links to livestreamed Mass from the Basilica; confession times for Good Friday; a series of reflections by Father Scott; blessing of the Easter food on Holy Saturday; and, on April 14, the first ABVM livestream—the Chaplet of Divine Mercy and Exposition and Benediction.

On April 3, despite the pandemic, 52 donors responded to the blood drive sponsored by the Knights of Columbus.

On April 28, the Knights reached out to the community to offer assistance to families impacted by Covid-19.

The Reopening...the Parish Response

On April 22, Governor Wolf announced his 3-phase (Red-Yellow-Green) approach to reopening the commonwealth. The five-county region of the Archdiocese, along with the rest of the state, remained in the Red Phase, which maintained the stay-at-home order and prohibited large gatherings. According to this plan, counties would move to a less restrictive phase when the region met criteria established by state health authorities. Having met state criteria, on June 5, the Southeast part of the state, which included the five counties of the Archdiocese, was scheduled to move to the Yellow Phase. This phase lifted the stay-at-home order and allowed for celebration of public Masses as long as appropriate sanitation and physical distancing practices were employed, and the number of worshippers inside the church building was limited.

To help parishes plan for safely resuming public Masses on June 6, on May 27, the Archdiocesan Office for Divine Worship published guidelines titled “The Celebration of the Sacred Liturgy During the Pennsylvania Yellow Phase and the Archdiocesan Restricted Phase.” The guidelines included requirements for Resumption of the Celebration of Public Mass, Sanitation measures, Social Distancing, and practices to be employed during the Sacred Liturgy to minimize the spread of COVID-19. In addition to the guidelines, the Office of Divine Worship also offered webinars to educate ministers on conducting worship. The guidance was a great help to parishes, but implementing the guidelines in the actual church environment would require careful thought and planning.

Prior to resuming the public celebration of Mass at ABVM, the Liturgy Committee met remotely via Zoom to decide how to implement the guidelines in our church building. This committee included musicians, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, ushers, greeters, sacristans, Father Scott, and permanent deacons Tom Hannan and Ron Lewis. One significant challenge was developing procedures for each ministry without being able to evaluate or practice the procedure in the church building with other ministers or with a congregation. The only workable solution was to implement the procedure, observe how things went, and adjust the procedure as needed.

Another requirement of the Yellow Phase was for Numbers of Occupancy: the church building occupancy had to be restricted to 50% of its normal occupancy based on the fire code. For ABVM, 50% capacity is approximately 400 people. Sectioning the church building for the distancing of 400 people needed to be orchestrated and accomplished.

Although reopening the church for Mass with parishioners in actual attendance was the first priority, parishioners also expressed a strong interest in livestreaming of Mass to maintain a connection with those who could not attend in person because of Red Phase restrictions. Working with a local TV/digital communications business, parish members selected a suitable camera and hardware that was then installed in time to broadcast the first livestream Mass on Ascension Thursday, May 21. The Mass was broadcast using Facebook Live and was viewed by parishioners on the parish's Facebook page. This broadcast was followed by regular broadcasts of Sunday 10 a.m. Masses before and after the reopening.

All the Sunday livestream Mass videos are available on the parish's Facebook page under "Videos" in the "More" menu at the top of the page so they can be viewed at any time. The current week's Mass can also be found on the parish website.

On Saturday, June 6, the church opened its doors for the public celebration of Mass. Father Scott posted this message on the parish website: "We at Assumption BVM Parish look forward to welcoming you back! Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we make our way back to the in-

person celebration of the Mass.” The first celebration of public Mass in several months was a major step on the parish’s path to recovery.