

Catholic teachers find challenge and change in online learning

No classes. No masses.

Catholic Education Week, celebrated in Alberta May 18-22, is an annual opportunity to showcase and celebrate Catholic schools, staff, students and what makes them different from other school systems.

However, with in-person learning and worshipping cancelled because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this year's events will look very different than in previous years. Educators say that just like in any classroom, online learning in faith presents challenge, change, and lessons for the future.

The masses, events, and video messages held during Catholic Education Week have all gone online.



“People are getting used to consuming information in that way, so we’ve actually ramped up this year. We’re going to have more than what we’ve ever had,” said Serena Shaw, president of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association, one of the principal organizers of the event.

“A lot of students are meeting virtually, at points throughout the week even in elementary, so they are meeting as classrooms and they do have opportunities to come together and pray the same way we do as parishioners right now. We’re finding ways to come unite in prayer. I think people are trying to find ways to connecting, and there’s a creativity that’s happening.”

Catholic Education Week's livestreamed events include praying the Rosary with St. Paul Bishop Paul Terrio, the Chaplet of Divine Mercy by Archbishop Gerard Pettipas of Grouard-McLennan on May 20, and the liturgy and blessing by Calgary Bishop William McGrattan on May 21.

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith will celebrate Mass on May 20, World Catholic Education Day.

The weeklong celebration also features social media campaigns and videos by the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association and the advocacy group Grateful Advocates for Catholic Education (GrACE). Each day, GrACE will share one of the five hallmarks of Catholic education: Created in the image of God, Catholic Worldview, Permeation of Faith, Gospel Witness, and Spirit of Communion.

Educators say finding that sense of community challenges Catholic educators.

"School is a community and in our Catholic faith, we are a community," said Jennifer Smadis, who teaches 25 Grade 5 students at St. John Paul II School in Fort Saskatchewan.

"Being on your own, in an online environment, may work for getting work done, but does it work for living in a community, sharing your gifts and talents, showing others your faith in what you do and how you act and how you treat others? That part will be missing."

Smadis said the most difficult part of online learning is not seeing the faces of her students. Some of them only display a profile photo when she conducts her classes online. While some students have benefited from online learning, it's difficult to gauge their understanding.

"Our discussion is very limited. We still do our prayers and readings and do our religion class and permeate the faith in other areas, but the discussion that is so vital to the children's understanding and connection to their faith is missing," said Smadis, whose three daughters attended Catholic schools.

Nevertheless, it doesn't detract from her calling as Catholic teacher.

"I've always thought of teaching as a vocation, not a job, right from the beginning. My priority is growing good children, helping them to grow into the best person they can be and to use the gifts that God has given them."

Most parishes in the Edmonton Archdiocese provide online Mass, which students can watch at any time. And learning from home also has an additional benefit.

"What we have in this time period is time," said Paul Corrigan, an assistant superintendent with the Elk Island Catholic School Division. "It allows one to reflect and take advantage of the opportunity to do the things in supporting your faith life that maybe you haven't the opportunity to do otherwise."

“Being removed from the sacraments is difficult for Catholic life, period,” added Corrigan, a father of five. “Having said that, having the opportunity to have the toddlers run around while watching a livestreamed Mass is something you don’t get in a physical building.”



Educators say the biggest challenge is that Catholics can’t physically be together in community for morning prayer, assemblies, and Mass. In the Elk Island Catholic Schools, principals are recording a daily video prayer so students have that same sense of structure.

On May 6, a virtual Mass was held from Sherwood Park dedicated to all of the EICS schools. Similar masses are planned in the future. Smadis said she was grateful to help with the music at that Mass.

“Everyone on my staff team are like ‘Oh you get to go to church!’ It does make you feel like ‘Oh, thank you, I have this moment of being with Jesus in person and around people instead of around the TV.’ ”

Corrigan noted that the cancellation of in-person learning is difficult for teachers, as well as students.

“They too are denied school community and church community, with all of the staff working from home themselves. We often don’t know what kind of pressures they may be under,” he said. “Teachers are stressed because they’re not able to do the level of work that they normally would like to do with their students.”

To that end, Elk Island Catholic Schools have made the well-being of teachers and staff a priority. That includes gathering staff for a virtual morning prayer and activities – virtual scavenger hunts, for example – that support staff wellness. In addition, schools have created care packages for staff at

home.

It's unclear what the Alberta school year will look like in the fall. Shaw said school divisions are planning to have different strategies depending on what the provincial government decides is best to protect public health. The [Alberta School Councils Association](#) is also asking parents, in a survey, for their view.

Whatever the plan, educators say there are lessons to be learned from the accommodations that have had to be made because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"First, off appreciation," Corrigan said. "Sometimes a busy classroom full of kids cannot feel so wonderful, but I know that all teachers will feel like it is wonderful when they're able to be back."

"Second, this has forced all our staff to engage in the digital world in a way that they have not previously done. The level of expertise at online learning will be a benefit once we're back in the brick-and-mortar buildings."

Outside the classroom, another lesson from the pandemic, said Serena Shaw, is that families need to take time, slow down, and connect with each other.

"I hope that we'll have learned about the importance of community," said Shaw, a trustee with Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools. "It's no secret that we're having to do with less in the education portfolio among others. I'm hoping that one of the lessons learned is that we can be creative and we are capable of finding new ways of doing things."

"For myself, the fact that I've been able to be home and cook supper for my family every night for the last number of months has been huge," she said. "It makes us kind of slow down and relook at our priorities."