

Financial needs of parishes remain as Advent and Christmas approaches

Parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Edmonton are grappling with an average 40-per-cent drop in collections due to COVID-19.

With Advent and Christmas approaching, Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith is making another appeal for donations as the pandemic continues.

Archbishop Smith said the drop in donations led to “very, very difficult” decisions in the Archdiocese and in parishes, but people have stepped up to help financially through pre-authorized payments, electronic transfers and even dropping off envelopes at their church.

“You’ve heard me appeal to you before, to your generosity, and you responded really, really well. Thank you. What I need to do at this point is to let you know the need remains. The fact is churches are receiving about 60 per cent in donations of what they would normally receive, and that’s causing some difficulties as you can well imagine,” Archbishop Smith said.

“So what I’d like to do is invite you, once again, to see how you can continue to support your parish financially as generously as possible.”

On average, the parish collection is at 60 per cent compared to last year, because Masses – and faith gatherings for all churches – are limited to one-third capacity at any one time.

“This is very, very unique. There’s no real sense of having to shut the doors at this time, but there are some that are struggling,” said Deacon Wayne Provencal, finance director for the Archdiocese.

Provencal said parish financial situations are unpredictable. Revenues are rising and falling month-to-month as people are becoming aware of the need and others become personally impacted by the pandemic.

Nevertheless, at some parishes means that some ministry programs could be cut. And the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the increased need for stewardship – parishioners providing so-called ‘time, talent and treasure’ – a commitment to help by volunteering and donating.



Rev. Marc Cramer

“Now, when the iron is hot, it’s good to strike and take care of the money issues as we’re going in to the crunch towards the end of the year,” said Rev. Marc Cramer, pastor of St. Charles, a parish considered one of the largest in the Archdiocese with roughly 5,000 registered families.

“The reality is if we had only the people who give loose change gave that loose change electronically, there would be no problem for us. Eight-five per cent of what we used to have is not coming in.”

In the Archdiocese, Cramer said the issue is a lack of money, as well as a lack of expectation, both in terms of time and talent – the amount of volunteering – and treasure or the financial commitment. When disasters, like wildfires or floods, donors ask how they can help not whether they should.

Father Cramer said that demonstrated the need for a more stable source of funding, such as tithing.

“We Catholics have the benefit of numbers. If everyone of our Catholic families gave \$5 per month consistently, we would not have quite this issue,” he said. “I used to be with the Mormons. Ten per cent of their money they would give to the church, so we don’t nickel and dime God. We’re giving God a pittance, and wonder why we only do so much. If we all paid tithing, or even half the people paid tithing, this would not be an issue at all. We don’t have that sense within the Catholic community.”

In a given year, Christmas and Easter are the biggest collections for the Archdiocese. This year’s Easter collection was down, because that’s when COVID first hit, and now Christmas collection is deemed critical for most parishes.

There have been cost-cutting measures. Priests have taken a 15-per-cent cut,

\$500 per month, to their salary of roughly \$38,000 per year and more than one-third of the staff at the Pastoral Administration Office have already been laid off.

The cathedraticum – or portion that parishes remit from their collection to the Archdiocese for administration – has also been reduced from 22 to 20 per cent, which has never happened before.

Since the pandemic hit, in-person collections at parishes aren't feasible, so electronic payments and pre-authorized payments have increased and continued to be encouraged. The Archdiocese has been helping parishes to set up that system.

Already parishes have reduced operating costs – labour, utilities and supplies, for example – and the impact varies between rural and urban parishes. The 15 big parishes in the Archdiocese – with parish membership in the thousands – have larger expenses and are hardest hit by the crowd restrictions.

"They are struck the most by a lack of walk-in traffic," Provencal said. "Because of the size, if you have a parish that can hold 1,000 normally and there's only 80 to 100 people, that makes a substantial difference."

Provencal said he's "optimistic", however the concern is the time it will take until a vaccine is widely distributed and the Archdiocese will likely struggle financially until the year 2022 or even 2023.

In addition, the separate collection for the Together We Serve campaign is only at 46 per cent of its goal of raising \$2 million. Locally, the campaign supports Newman Theological College, St. Joseph Seminary and Catholic Social Services, as well as mission dioceses in Canada, Development and Peace and, internationally, the Pontifical Mission Societies.

"Parishioners are supporting their parishes first, more so than anything else right now," Provencal said, in an effort to ensure the local parish survives and can 'keep its doors open.'

Some parishes, like those in the Fort Saskatchewan area, have stable finances but lack volunteers.

"The time and talent is what's needed. Right now, our treasure is stable and allow us to operate as we need to," said Rev. Kris Schmidt, pastor of Our Lady of the Angels parish in Fort Saskatchewan, the administrative parish for parishes in Gibbons, Redwater, Skaro and St. Michael, Alta.

"In terms of time and talent it's always borderline for having enough volunteers to have the multiple Masses that we have," he said. "The smaller the parish, the more invested people are, as well as length of time that they've been attached to that parish. The church is just part of their makeup, whereas that's less predominant in bigger city parishes."

Both Father Cramer, and his associate Rev. JD Carmichael, are giving a portion of their salary to the parish. For parishioners, the expectation should be that they provide more in terms of stewardship.

“People always talk about dance and hockey. They don’t say ‘Give what you’re able to do’. They say ‘This is what you need to give in terms of volunteer time. This what you need to give in terms of money’. And then people do it or they don’t.”

Cramer said the COVID-19 pandemic is also an opportunity to re-examine communication between pastor and parish. St. Charles parish is now using the smartphone app Flocknote to reach out to parishioners amid the upheaval and uncertainty.

“If we don’t use this opportunity, as hard as it is to be better, then we’re wasting this opportunity.”