

Pastors, educators challenged to nurture the crucial human element in faith formation

Elk Island Catholic school students have grown accustomed to seeing a priest once a week.

It's an opportunity for them and their teachers to maintain a connection with the pastor – and the faith formation that goes along with it – that will need a boost amid the social distancing limits of COVID-19.

In a livestreamed Mass Aug. 27, Archbishop Richard Smith said he was proud and grateful for the efforts of teachers, staff, administrators and parents to prepare for students to return this fall.

In a memo to the 10 Catholic school districts in the Archdiocese of Edmonton, Archbishop also outlines ways in which that relationship with parishes can be strengthened through in-person or livestreamed visits by priests, livestreamed masses, outdoor liturgies, videos and newsletter.

The issue is particularly acute as some students and their families choose to learn online from home.

“The thrust of Catholic education is that it's not just a knowledge-based endeavour. It's formation. It's about the whole human person,” said Rev. Kris Schmidt, pastor of Our Lady of the Angels Parish in Fort Saskatchewan.

“That's why online learning is trash from a Catholic perspective; it's not a substitute. It's second best, at best, as a stop-gap for a problematic situation. Never from a Catholic perspective would we move to online learning, because formation is completely removed. So that's why it's important that the kids are back in class for schooling.”

“The way that we grow in our faith together is through our relationship with the Church and our relationship with each other. There's not much relational reality happening through Google Meets or Zoom calls,” Father Schmidt said.

Catholic educators say they are looking at all of those ideas to keep that relationship with the parish, as students tentatively return to the classroom.



Paul Corrigan

“They will notice a difference. At the beginning of the year, opening masses and opening celebrations are a big part of what we do,” said Paul Corrigan, assistant superintendent of faith formation for Elk Island Catholic Schools.

“It’s the communal celebrations that are the big problem. How do you then foster the relationship with the parish in light of that? That’s kind of what we’re honing in on.

“It is important for us to get the religious, and specifically the pastor of the parish as the shepherd of the parish, involved with the students. Maybe not all our kids are, especially at this time, involved in the parish or being able to attend the parish, so having the priest come to them where we know they are is essential and part of our mission as Catholic educators.”

Smaller, teacher-led liturgies in the classroom are among the ideas planned.

Evergreen Catholic Schools, west of Edmonton, is also looking at smaller masses and liturgies.

“Each school will be kind of sorting that out as they go along, what that’s going to look like,” said Karen Koester, coordinator of religious education for the division.

“We can’t do full school celebrations, but we can do smaller ones. There are other opportunities that we can take advantage of,” added superintendent Mike Paonessa.

The division says faith formation will continue to be a priority with the help of priests, deacons in the parishes and school division chaplain Mike Landry, who works in the high schools as well as the younger grades through visits and virtual masses.

“They do such amazing work in our buildings, that culture of faith being lived and permeated and being part of everything we do; it just happens so well. It’s

never a concern or an issue that because of COVID we're going to have to set things aside. Not a chance," Paonessa said.

As early as the spring, Father Schmidt was livestreaming Mass from Our Lady of the Angels Parish with Elk Island Catholic students and staff participating. Teachers would also share the livestream in class.

Father Schmidt also co-produces faith-based vlogs for Grandin Media.

In Elk Island schools, priest visits are expected to continue, with longer visits to fewer classrooms.

An outdoor liturgy this fall at the nearby Skaro shrine may now happen at the end of the school year instead.

"Relationship is so important in handing on the faith," in particular for young people, Father Schmidt said. It's critical that pastors do the "maximum that we're permitted to do" within COVID-19 limits.

"I know what it was like to go to high school here, and I know how little faith played in," Father Schmidt said of Elk Island Catholic schools. "So I want to contribute to that solution rather than just leave it up to the schools to look after. It's a joint effort."

"It's tied to our sacramental understanding of our faith as Catholics," Father Schmidt explained. "We don't just sit and home and eat bread and drink wine and say that we've had Communion. It's the way we come together and the way that God promises grace through the sacraments He gives to His Church. And the priest is one of those sacraments."

While changes are coming to the relationship between parish and school district, learning the religion course material is expected to be seamless for students. *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ* – a program used in Alberta and Ontario schools – is available in-class and online for Grades 1 through 7.

And educators say students in school divisions where courses are in quarters, rather than terms, will have more immersive instruction in religion.

In Elk Island Catholic Schools, high school teachers have resources available through the St. Isidore online school, which has grown in popularity as students choose online learning.

In addition, the new online Chesterton Academy has seen tremendous growth. Educators were hoping for 20 students at best to sign up; instead 55 are registered, and the academy is also supporting students in the U.S.

Students learning from home may notice a difference in the level of discussion online.

"The opportunities to connect with students as a religion teacher online are

different and no less than they are in the classroom,” said Koester, who has taught religion in the St. Teresa online high school program in the past.

“What I noticed is that a lot of high school students might dialogue with me in a way that they might not in front of their peers. I think there’s a real opportunity there for religion teachers.”

Nevertheless, as part of faith formation of students, it’s the relationships that will be missed.

“We’re incarnate beings. We’re made in flesh. To be in each other’s presence is something you can’t replace with a screen obviously,” Koester said. “All the things we feel as adults about being in the same room for Mass at a parish versus viewing it online are the same things that all Catholics are missing in that regard are what kids are missing too, just that sense of being together with each other. You can’t replace that.”

Father Schmidt said the difficulty in navigating the relationship between parish and school amid COVID-19 is part of a larger struggle, complicated by a shortage of priests and a cultural focus on individualism.

“I think that’s just going to be a societal struggle to work back towards real relationship. We can see it already in the Church with Mass attendance. Yes, some people are not coming for right reasons and some people are still anxious. But I think there’s whole group of people that are not coming because their habit, their relationship with the Mass, has dissipated. It’ll be the same thing in the schools.”

If there’s an upside to COVID-19, it’s the realization that relationships matter.

“When this does go away, it will be a rebuilding process in that moment,” Father Schmidt said.

“I hope it’s shown how much we need each other.”