

Priests get creative as they find new ways to reach faithful

Rev. Adaikala Raja dons his purple vestments, takes hold of his rosary, presses record on his smartphone and begins to preach. His church is empty, but he has a virtual congregation in the hundreds.

It's the new reality for Father Raja, the pastor of St. John Bosco Parish in northeast Edmonton. He is one of more than 15 priests across the Edmonton Archdiocese livestreaming Mass. Public masses were suspended on March 16 to help slow the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.



Rev. Adaikala Raja

Father Raja's daily routine now consists of a rosary livestream at 8:45 a.m., Mass at 9 a.m., the Angelus prayer at noon, and the Divine Mercy Chaplet devotional at 3 p.m. On Fridays, he also livestreams a holy hour of prayer followed by the Stations of the Cross.

"Prayer – this is what is most needed now," said Raja, whose livestreams receive as many as 600 views daily. "People still feel very much connected to the Church. They have told me seeing these daily masses and livestreams each day is strengthening their faith and giving them a lot of consolation. In these circumstances, it's a great motivator to keep people praying."

The suspension of public Mass has taken its toll on priest and parishioner, but pastors have found ways to reach their flocks.

“I’ll be frank, it’s very stressful. It’s this feeling of hitting a wall each day, and not knowing what to do to with myself,” said Rev. Roger Niedzielski, the pastor of Christ-King Parish in Stettler, 180 km south of Edmonton. “I was ordained to be with my people and to celebrate the Eucharist with them. It’s a huge cross not being able to do the things I was ordained to do.”

However, Niedzielski stresses this is not a time to despair. As Holy Week approaches, he encourages Catholics to meditate on the hope we celebrate at Easter.

“In this very stark, desert experience we do find hope,” he said. “In this journey of Lent, looking towards our Lord’s passion, there’s going to be a whole lot of pain and suffering – something many of us feel right now. But the glory and victory of the cross and resurrection is also coming. That spiritual reflection is constantly before my eyes – the cross of Christ – and that’s what gives me hope.”



Rev. Roger Niedzielski

Father Niedzielski has found an alternative way to offer that hope to others. Instead of livestreaming Mass, he shares daily reflections on his Facebook page. His meditations often discuss the anxieties of the COVID-19 pandemic and how this historic moment is calling us closer to God.

“I decided it would be a good daily exercise to share what’s on my heart and offer it to people,” said Niedzielski, who began these “online homilies” March 18. “I’m trying to convey some sense of hope in the midst of this desolation we’re collectively experiencing. I really want to underline that we’re not going through this difficult time alone. The sense of pain we’re experiencing is communal.”

Rev. Carlos Nunez also had to get creative to continue his ministry.

At his rural parishes in Killam, Daysland and Heisler, it is nearly impossible for Father Nunez to get a strong enough WiFi connection to livestream Mass effectively. Instead, Nunez has turned his parents' dining room in Edmonton into a mini-chapel, where he livestreams Mass almost every day.

Father Nunez said it's a powerful tool of evangelization.

"Just by seeing a Mass on their Facebook feed, it may stir some hearts to see that Mass and faith is something they should bring back into their lives," he said.



Rev. Carlos Nunez celebrates Mass from his parents' dining room in Edmonton. Courtesy of Rev. Carlos Nunez

"I think people are encouraged by seeing their priests pray for them. Regardless of these circumstances, we're all praying together in the universal Church. It's also drawing a lot more priests to social media and that's a positive thing. We're reaching people that want to celebrate Mass, but also those who haven't been to Mass in a very long time."

Father Raja agrees. With job losses and business closures, many of life's most materialistic needs have been taken from us, he said. And now – more than

ever – people recognize their need for God.

“This is teaching all of us a lesson in humility,” Father Raja said. “This small virus, so tiny it’s not even visible to the human eye, now controls the entire world. It doesn’t matter what country you’re from, if you’re rich or poor, in front of this virus we are all nothing.

“I know it’s very painful, but there are great lessons here. This is a time where families must be united to each other and recognize what is most essential in their lives.”

As we look to the future, Father Niedzielski says we must trust that God is with us – no matter what.

“The Lord has something planned for this,” he said. “I don’t know what it is or how He plans to communicate it to us, but we trust the Lord is there. He’s always present.”

CORRECTION: There are 15 parishes in the archdiocese livestreaming Mass and other prayer services.