

Thousands find inspiration, comfort and community in online Mass

When Sarah Willette watched her first livestreamed Mass, it became a family reunion.

All public masses have been suspended indefinitely in the Edmonton Archdiocese in an effort to contain the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus. Masses will be livestreamed with no congregation present.

Instead of being disappointed, Willette gathered a group of 22 family members from across the province to watch the [livestreamed St. Joseph's Basilica Mass](#) together on March 22 – the first Sunday where no public Mass was celebrated.

“Everyone from my grandpa to my aunts, uncles, cousins and theirs dogs joined us on the video chat,” Willette said. “It was absolutely wonderful to celebrate Mass this way. It was a like a big family event but from the comfort of our own homes.”



Sarah Willette

Catholic dioceses throughout the province have taken similar action, after the Alberta government limited gatherings to 50 people to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As of March 23, there were 301 confirmed cases of the COVID-19 virus in Alberta and 2,091 in Canada.

The Mass from St. Joseph's Basilica, celebrated by Archbishop Richard Smith, generated more than 10,000 views and 400 comments on Facebook. It was one of

nine diocesan masses streamed on March 22. A full list of parishes in the Archdiocese of Edmonton that are streaming daily or weekly masses can be viewed [here](#).

Claire Stitsen and her husband Anthony watched the basilica Mass from their home in Mearns, 60 km north of Edmonton.

To mark the occasion, the Stitsens gave their home the atmosphere of being in church. They dressed in their Sunday best, placed fresh flowers and candles around the television, and took part in every response and action of the liturgy.

Claire Stitsen was shocked by how emotionally powerful the Mass was, in spite of an audio echo and the occasional lag time loading the screen.

“It was so touching it brought me to tears,” she said. “We just felt the unity of the whole Catholic community there with us. In this very serious moment, together in prayer and celebration, we can be there for each other. It just made our Sunday.”



Anthony Stitsen and his wife Claire set up a church-like atmosphere in their living room to watch the livestreamed Mass.

The Willettes did the same thing.

“We tried to maintain it as if we were right there in the pews,” Sarah Willette said. “We encouraged everyone to dress well and set up a little altar. When you’re supposed to stand we stood, during the consecration we knelt, and we even gave each other a virtual sign of peace. I was surprised by the sense of normalcy about the whole experience. We really felt like we were there.”

In his homily, Archbishop Smith spoke about the ways God is calling us to His presence, even in the midst of a pandemic that has forced cities into lockdown and infected nearly 400,000 globally.

The COVID-19 virus left the world with uncertainty, but there is reason for hope.

“God is awakening us to what it means to be human – a meaning to which our eyes have too long been closed,” Archbishop Smith said. “We are witnessing the extraordinary efforts of medical professionals, working to the point of burnout, to care for the sick. We are seeing a collective recognition – one that is literally uniting all of humanity – that human life is supremely precious and that all other priorities are secondary to its protection.

“God’s action is lovingly taking us in hand and transforming this uncertain moment of present anxiety into the stable ground of future hope.”

It’s a message that resonated with Roberto Bencivenga, who watched the basilica Mass from his home in Red Deer.



Roberto Bencivenga

“Everyone needs a bit of moral, psychological and spiritual support right now, and his homily did just that,” said Bencivenga. “He showed that, under these very stressful times, this is a chance for everyone to see that life is the most important thing. It’s not our material concerns but our lives and our lives in the hereafter that is our primary worry.

“It was all very uplifting.”

For many, the most profound moment of the basilica Mass was the [Prayer of Spiritual Communion](#) recited when one can’t physically receive Holy Communion.

The prayer was new to Sarah Willette, but she believes it will help Catholics appreciate the Eucharist even more.

“We can make this a beautiful opportunity to discover how we still receive Jesus spiritually,” she said. “This time will also teach us to not take the availability of the Eucharist for granted. We’re being denied this gift right now. It calls us to a serious period of self-reflection and to be with our Lord spiritually.

“Once we have that gift back and can return to Church, I think we’ll see a surge of faith. We’ll all be longing for our faith and our love for the Eucharist so much more.”

Claire Stitsen hopes future livestreamed Masses will display the words of the Prayer of Spiritual Communion on screen, or priests will explain its importance

before Mass.

Stitsen is saddened that public masses were suspended, but she believes the online alternative will resonate with parishioners.

“I feel God is calling us to a deeper faith and more intense time for prayer,” she said. “I believe the Mass has given us strength for this whole week, and reminded us of what we need to be prepared for and accepting of. As a Catholic community, we have to make sure we’re caring for each other and keeping the seriousness of this health crisis in mind.”