

# Even without students on campus, college ministries thrive

In a few weeks or less, nearly every college and university in America sent its students home and brought its courses online. While most institutions have had a long history with online learning, the shift is nonetheless monumental. As the focus has been mostly on coursework, other aspects within higher education have been forced to reinvent themselves in the face of COVID-19 and related in-person restrictions.

Consider admissions, counseling, career services and campus ministry to name a few. Each department, typically relying on face-to-face interaction, has quickly pivoted to a new paradigm of work. The expectations for their offices have not been lowered. New students still have to be recruited and internships still require coordination. What's different is how they are being asked to work.

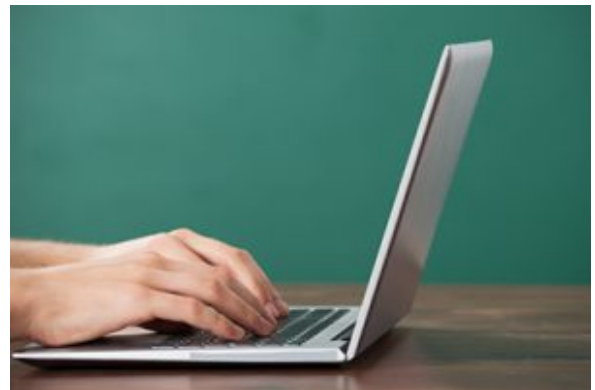
From the perspective of pastoral care, Catholic campus ministry has been a shining light in this "new normal." Before COVID-19, Catholic campus ministry centers offered students a safe haven with robust programming ranging from small groups to service opportunities to daily and weekend Masses. Students could simply walk into their Catholic center or Newman house in order to study, pray and enjoy fellowship.

When students left campus, all of that changed.

In addition to students being denied access to campus, campus ministers themselves were sent home. "Figure it out," was the general message given to the nearly 1,500 professional Catholic campus ministers across the country. These part and full time employees were left to strategize and answer difficult questions such as:

- How do we provide spiritual direction online?
- How do we ensure that small groups continue to meet?
- How do we serve the poor while at the same time socially distancing ourselves?
- How do we live-stream Mass and other opportunities for prayer?
- How do we meet one-on-one with the students in our care?
- How do we assess what's working besides counting pageviews and downloads?

The answers to these questions are myriad. Many campuses, staffed by a handful of campus ministers, have paired back ministry in order to focus on doing a few things well. Other programs with larger staffs have been able to bring most of their on-campus offerings online. COVID-19 has been proof that, in campus ministry, one size doesn't fit all.



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CCMA, the Catholic Campus Ministry Association, has brought together hundreds of campus ministers for weekly "Office Hours" via Zoom. These sessions have provided many examples of creativity amidst the struggle of working remotely. A throughline has emerged from campus to campus: the ministry doesn't stop.

One chaplain, Fr. Joshua West, LC, the chaplain at NC State University, began live-streaming Mass from his iPhone early on in the quarantine. While he had no idea how to do this, he did

a bit of research and pressed record. He then figured out other ways to be in touch with students. In an interview on the CampusMIN Podcast, he described the following weeks and his approach to ministry, “my advice would be ‘just do it’ and make it happen.”

One of the nation’s largest programs at the University of Dayton established a mid-day moment for prayer. By providing students and faculty with an anchor of spirituality, campus ministers have led brief sessions of prayer. Ranging from Taize to Ignatian Exams, the mid-day prayer offers a unifying moment for the entire campus.

Other expressions of online prayer have taken the form of weekly concerts. Saint Paul’s Outreach, an apostolate serving over a dozen campuses, has launched Stories and Songs via Facebook Live. These acoustic shows will allow students connected to Saint Paul’s Outreach with an opportunity to pray for and with one another. The series is also meant to be a vehicle for outreach to those who might not yet know Christ.

Other campuses have also expanded their evangelization efforts. Montclair State University’s Newman Center has created Quarantined Catholics, a weekly discussion series on Facebook. Featuring Fr. Jim Chern, Chaplain and Montclair students, each week’s show has thousands of views and the opportunity for watchers to comment live as the show is taking place.

There’s no question that campus ministry has effectively shifted to online ministry in the past few weeks. This hasn’t meant a total discontinuation of the Church’s sacramental life on campus. At the University of Miami Catholic Student Center and Saint Augustine Church, Masses have been live-streamed as on other campuses. In addition, the priests offered “Drive-thru Confessions” in the parish parking lot. While this was eventually discontinued after the Holy See determined that cell phones could not be used during Confession, the

sacramental experience was well-received by many parishioners.

COVID-19 has changed everything on college campuses including the way that Catholic campus ministry operates. While there is still uncertainty as to when students will return, a growing confidence has emerged in the efficacy of the Church's ministry within higher education.

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