

# Religious education continues in different format during pandemic

WASHINGTON (CNS) – When parishes announced they were no longer having public Masses or church events due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this brought typical religious education classes, youth retreats and preparation programs for first Communion and confirmation across the country to a stop or at least sent them in a slightly different direction.

Parishes, unlike many schools, were unable to put in place online programs for distance learning. In many cases, parishes had to furlough their directors of religious education while not continuing business as usual. The teachers of religious education classes are almost all volunteers, facing their own challenges in the current pandemic.

But at diocesan, and sometimes parish levels, church leaders have been working hard to come up with creative ways to stay connected with these young people and their families and to give them resources to help the students continue to grow in faith during this time of isolation.

From the start of discontinued religious education classes, a major concern for parents was if or when their children would receive first Communion or confirmation, sacraments that typically are given in late spring and that involve big groups of people.

Archdiocesan directors of catechesis and religious education from coast to coast – specifically in the Washington and Los Angeles archdioceses – told Catholic News Service that they have reassured parents these sacraments will take place, but they just don't know how or when right now.

Jamie Gutierrez, coordinator of youth ministry and confirmation at St. Frances of Rome Parish in Azusa, California, said she has told parents from the start there are no clear answers about the confirmation schedule and this still might not clear when California's stay-at-home order is lifted, but one thing is certain: confirmations will take place.

She also has pointed out that this is a sacrament of community and the parish wants these young people to celebrate with their families, so if that means waiting a little bit longer, that is what they will do.

Similarly, Katie Tassinari, religious education coordinator for the San Gabriel Region, one of five regions in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, said she has advised parish directors of religious education and parents and teens alike that "we fill not forget" the youths awaiting their confirmation.

Last year in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, more than 23,000 young people received the sacrament of confirmation and nearly 40,000 children received first Communion.

Tassinari has stressed that confirmations will take place even if those being confirmed didn't go to every class or the usually required retreat. She said it comes down to, "what they need to know and not making families jump through hoops" of getting in extra requirements in order to be ready for the sacrament.

"We have to help our people to think outside the mindset" of usual lessons and "make sure we walk with them and reassure them," she said.

Sara Blauvelt, director for catechesis in the Archdiocese of Washington, similarly said the usual confirmation preparation can't be done right now, but what can't be overlooked is that the young people who will be confirmed are about to "bring their faith to the world."

“This is a defining moment for our confirmandis,” she said, noting that “how they see where their faith is an anchor and help them use this, not just now, but on the other side of this pandemic, is an invitation and a challenge” to religious educators and parents alike.

One thing diocesan and parish leaders do not want to do at this time is add a home-school religious education dimension to parents who are already overseeing their children’s online school learning and juggling working at home or, conversely, the challenges of being furloughed or unemployed.

So for Blauvelt, this has meant sending out resources weekly to parishes that they can send on to their families to give them some tools for teaching the faith.

She is aware that not everyone wants to do another Zoom call or even online work, so for younger students, in particular, she has sent links for families to use old-fashioned flash cards for vocabulary words.

She said parents right now already have a lot on their plates, so even if they simply see this time at home as a way to pray together as a family or to talk about God at the dinner table, that’s important. She also hopes parents might come away with skills that would make them more comfortable talking about their faith and more involved in the faith formation of their children in the future.

At her California parish, Gutierrez has been reaching out to the young people through the main way they communicate, social media, which has involved posting regular questions or reflections, especially during Holy Week, on the parish youth group’s Instagram account.

Some parishes have set up Zoom telephone conferences for parents and their children and parishes and dioceses are considering virtual retreats. Some parishes have encouraged their youth groups to watch the online Masses together in a

Zoom group, and one parish encouraged children in the parish to set up an altar in the home where they would watch the livestreamed Masses with their families.

Students who had been part of their parish religious education program no matter what grade they are in have all had a different end of the year than had ever been anticipated.

As Sister Rosalia Meza, a Verbum Dei sister, who is director of the Office of Religious Education in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, put it: the content is very important, but at this moment, the young people in the church “need to perceive that their faith is relevant.”

More than anything, they need to experience being “loved and sustained by God,” she added.