

# **New survey of bishops details financial impact of COVID-19 pandemic on dioceses, parishes**

The vast majority of the nation's Catholic bishops say the novel coronavirus pandemic has upended the life of their local Churches, especially financially.

Nearly all (95%) of the bishops who responded to a recent survey from Georgetown University's [Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate](#) said their dioceses had directly helped parishes apply for federal or state financial assistance programs.

"The PPP SBA 'forgivable' loans have been quite helpful thus far," one unnamed bishop wrote in the CARA survey, referring to the federal Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program to help employers keep workers on payrolls during the pandemic.

The Associated Press reported Friday that Catholic entities were given at least \$1.4 billion in taxpayer-backed coronavirus aid. A spokeswoman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops told the AP that the loans were "an essential lifeline to help faith-based organizations" during the pandemic, which shut down most of the nation's economy.

The Associated Press said Catholic institutions reported retaining at least 407,900 jobs with PPP money.

For months, individual pastors and bishops have spoken publicly about the financial hardships that the pandemic posed to local parishes, schools, vital diocesan ministries and Catholic Charities agencies that serve the most vulnerable in

their communities.

“How long will it take to recover financially? We may not be able to do so,” wrote one bishop to the CARA survey, which was distributed to Catholic dioceses and eparchies during the spring and summer.

“There was nothing really surprising here, but I think it was good to put some numbers to some of these things. That seems like something we needed,” said Jonathan L. Wiggins, CARA’s director of parish surveys, who analyzed the poll’s findings.

Wiggins told Our Sunday Visitor said the survey is “very much a work in flux” because the 116 bishops who responded did so as the coronavirus was impacting various regions of the country in different ways throughout the spring and summer.

“We need to do a further survey later on to see what some of (the bishops) who said they were considering certain steps actually ended up doing,” Wiggins said. “It will be curious to see how long the financial hit lasts and whether it will have an impact on what they do in the long run.”

The unnamed bishop who mentioned the PPP loan also wrote in the CARA survey that his diocese was planning for a 30% reduction in parish assessments because the absence of public Masses for several weeks resulted in a steep dropoff in collections. The bishop further worried about [the enrollment and financial viability of local Catholic schools](#) since many parents had lost their jobs and, therefore, their ability to pay their children’s tuition.

“We might have to let employees go. Won’t be able to carry out the vision of the New Evangelization and catechesis as planned including faith formation programs,” wrote another bishop, who was not identified in the CARA report.

Around 87% of bishops said they had taken steps to help parishioners consider online giving while they were unable to

attend public Masses. But even with increased online giving, several bishops and pastors have said it does not make up for the collection plate's absence. A previous CARA survey found that 48 percent of identified Catholics said they preferred to give in person.

"It will be difficult to recoup that and what has been lost in the past two months. We are just coming out of bankruptcy," another bishop wrote in the CARA survey.

The financial impact from COVID-19 has prompted 15% of bishops to eliminate one or more diocesan programs, according to the CARA survey. Almost a quarter of the responding bishops (23 bishops) said they were considering closing one or more parishes.

Noting studies that indicate Americans often first seek help from their churches when in distress, Wiggins said it was "very important that parishes be functioning to the extent they can, because there is so much need moving forward" amid the pandemic.

"The rate of suicides is going up, and there are all kinds of stresses going up right now," Wiggins said. "It's very important that the place where people are most likely to turn can be there and able to respond in some way."

One-fifth of the responding bishops said they have closed one or more Catholic elementary schools, while 14% said they have taken steps to close one or more Catholic high schools. About 17% said they had furloughed or laid off diocesan staff.

The majority of bishops said they had waived diocesan assessments for their cash-strapped parishes, while others told CARA they were waiting to see their financial figures from the current fiscal year's fourth quarter before taking action.

Besides money, the CARA survey indicates that pandemic has

impacted the morale of the bishops, clergy, lay ministers and chancery staff members. The shutdowns not only resulted in a dropoff in collections and cuts to ministries, but made further demands on bishops and diocesan officials who helped Catholic schools provide distance learning and parishes to host online Masses.

The shutdowns not only prevented most of the lay faithful from attending Mass for several weeks, but they also affected the Church's sacramental life.

The CARA survey underscored that the pandemic – because of social distancing requirements and public health protocols – impacted the Church's ability to celebrate first Communions, confirmations, weddings, baptisms and funeral Masses. The vast majority of sacramental preparation and RCIA programs were also “very affected,” according to the CARA survey.

Wiggins told Our Sunday Visitor that CARA is conducting a similar survey for parishes to learn more about the pandemic's local impact to Catholic life. Wiggins said he expects that survey to be released in the near future.

*Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*