

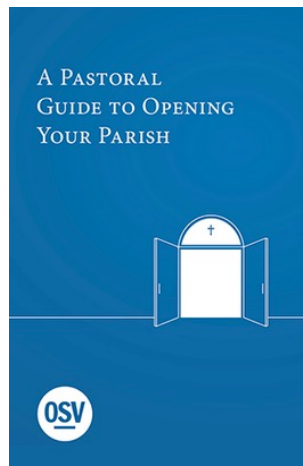
# How technology can help our parishes move forward

COVID-19 is a hard lesson in the classroom of life. Those of us who trust in divine providence know that God always has a plan, and he acts always in our best interest. As a father of two younger children, I find myself understanding this more and more every day. We may not always see it at first, but with eyes of faith we can see the hand of God, even in the most difficult of challenges. I am not saying that COVID-19 is a beautiful act of nature, but it has truly been a moment to reevaluate, a time to think outside the box and an opportunity to adapt. As a parish consultant for Our Sunday Visitor, I have been following and working closely with parishes around the United States to offer support and facilitate an exchange of ideas to help parish leaders stay connected with their parish communities. I have truly been inspired by great examples of outreach, digital communication and support. As we look back, we can say, "We did it, we survived." But we also need to say, "Look at what we've learned."

Some of us can remember vividly the day we were thrown into the pool and learned very quickly how to adapt to the new environment of water. Others might have gradually entered the pool one step at the time. I still remember how cold that water was. But we learned about water and how to swim with some help and guidance. We adapted to a new environment.

In parish ministry, many of us were thrown into the pool of technology, social media and digital communication, and we learned many new things. Or perhaps some of us were already doing a few of these things and got even better.

**Booklet**



This article is included in “A Pastoral Guide to Opening Your Parish,” a new booklet from OSV. As our parishes begin to reopen following local guidelines, the Catholic faithful have many questions and legitimate concerns about what life will look like post-pandemic, and we hope this booklet helps give parish leaders a playbook to welcome back parishioners following the shutdown. For more information, or to order, [click here](#).

Learning from this means we cannot simply go back to the way things were. Imagine a pastor or parish administrator saying: “Finally, we can go back to the old normal. No need to emphasize online giving anymore because we are back to our Sunday collections at Mass. We can also relax our efforts in digital communication and social media since we are finally out of this mess.” Imagine a parish director of faith formation saying: “Now that we are past this, let’s take back the responsibility of faith formation from the domestic church so parents don’t have to be burdened with this at home. They already have so many other things going on.” These might be exaggerated statements, but if we adopt a growth mindset, we should know that the most sensible approach here is to take the good things we learned and use them for the better.

[Read more from our special section ‘Moving Forward in Faith’ here](#)

So, what has this time of quarantine and social distancing

taught us? Let's take a look at some success stories and best practices in communication, outreach and service that we learned, and use them for the present and the future. Let's find a way to incorporate the learning of these new skills that God has so opportunely shared with us.

## **Personal connection**

When we talk of evangelization and making more disciples, when we talk about growing our parishes and schools, step one is to truly believe in the Good News, but the next step is to find as many ways as possible to share this message. We all know this. But to reach more people requires that we utilize more tools and offer people more ramps to get on the highway.

One thing that exemplary parishes have done well is connecting with their people over the phone. They created a phone-call team that often focused on reaching out to the elderly, the sick, major donors, families of first communicants and simply asking them how they were doing and if there was anything they needed. Phone scripts were created for each person of the team, and they covered the parish directory. Imagine what your parish would look like if you could continue this personal touch. Could you imagine a parishioner's reaction to a personal phone call from their pastor or from someone at the parish, just to see how they are doing? Sign me up for that parish! This is a great example of building community. This is a church.

## **Livestreamed liturgies**

Then there's livestreaming the Mass. Many dioceses and parishes have been streaming the Mass on Facebook live and/or on YouTube, with a link to join on the website. This has been a great way to generate traffic to the parish website and to access your parish's social media page. But what about now? Should we stop this approach, now that we are able to gather once again? Honestly, we should be asking ourselves the bigger

question: How many of our registered parishioners attend Sunday Mass? Would we be able to reach more people if we continued the streaming? The answer is yes. You could also stream the proclamation of the Gospel and your sermon as a shorter alternative and share that on Facebook or your parish website. I have seen quite a few priests doing this already, way before COVID-19.

On a similar note, there have been quite a few bishops, priests, parish staff, school principals and teachers who have offered daily or weekly video messages. Depending on your resources, some have used professional video equipment, and others have simply propped their phones on a stack of books. Either way, a short video message can go a long way. It is definitely more personal than a piece of mail, or just another email in their packed inboxes. This doesn't mean we need to eliminate bulletins, newsletters, mailings and emails, but this is another way to reach more people. These video messages show your empathy, your emotions, your sense of humor and your care for them. But remember, shorter is better.

Online giving is another one of many reasons that some parishes have been able to withstand these difficult times. Once the restrictions to gather have been lifted and you have had the opportunity to celebrate being together in person once again, remind your parishioners that their generosity is the reason we are all still here. Let's prepare for the future by moving to more convenient and consistent solutions for our giving. Let's "quarantine-proof" your offering of financial support, in case this ever happens again, and let's use this time-saving function as a way to dedicate time to other ministries such as parish outreach and social media.

## **Social media**

Many parishes have already been using social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. But one of my favorite examples of connecting was a parish youth ministry program at

St. Pius X in Greensboro, North Carolina, which created the Quarantine Challenge. Every day, the teens had a task posted to help them grow in holiness – from making their bed to filling a bag with clothes to donate, or from writing a letter to someone they miss to keeping the Sabbath holy. If we want to reach younger generations and millennial parents, we must continue using social media platforms to reach them.

## **The domestic church**

Another highlight to all this has been affirming, supporting and involving the domestic church in faith formation. I remember a phone call from a diocesan director once the announcement was made to close parishes. We discussed the providential opportunity to promote family catechesis. If there was ever a moment, it was now. We all know how important it is to involve parents in the sharing and living of the Faith to their children. Parishes and schools alike had the experience of being thrown in the pool of digital catechesis, equipping families with tools to teach the faith at home. But in all honesty, isn't this what we should have been doing already? With many dioceses trying to implement this approach, here was an opportunity for everyone to try it.

I was recently engaged in a Facebook group chat where directors of faith formation were discussing their plan of action for the fall of this year. Some were simply hoping to go back to the way things were. Others were looking at a blended learning approach where some classes would be completed by catechists at the parish, while other sessions would be done at home, led by parents. Sure, it is very difficult to expect parents to work full time from home and also homeschool their children, but when social distancing is gone and schools are open, we should never forget that equipping parents with realistic tools to share the faith at home is an essential part to catechesis. Teaching the faith is truly a collaboration between the parish or school and the

parents of these children. It would be a disservice to the children if we took that responsibility completely away from the domestic church and solely offered a drop-off model of faith formation.

God created us as social beings. As humans, we need social interaction and God calls us to be present to one another. Personally, I can't wait to receive the Eucharist at Mass, to see my fellow parishioners in person and to celebrate our fellowship. But I truly hope and pray that every parish community throughout the Catholic Church will move forward with the digital skills and the acquired knowledge they learned during these challenging times. We cannot simply go back to the old wineskin or bury our talents in the ground. "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) means we must make sure that we are reaching as many people as possible: in person, in print, on the phone, but now also through a new digital presence to our parish community.

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