Columns
Spirituality



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As of mid-July, religious gatherings were still being discouraged in our area of the Philippines, as cases of the coronavirus were escalating. But in other parts of the country, Masses in the churches have resumed, as long as a 50% limit on the venue capacity is observed. Persons above 60 and children below 21 years old are still required to stay home. Certain businesses have been allowed to resume operations.

Recently our parish, Holy Family Parish-Kamias, resumed daily public Masses inside the church, limited to 40-50 participants, with strict health and safety measures implemented, such as social distancing and regular disinfection between Masses to ensure the safety of everyone.

However, daily online Masses are still streamed on Facebook for people who are required to stay home. Starting this week, every Wednesday, area Masses will be held in different parts of the community. People, especially senior citizens, can stay outside their houses to hear Mass and receive Communion. The celebrant will use a loudspeaker to reach many houses.

During the lockdown, we had procession of the Blessed Sacrament twice a week. The parish priest, with a few of the parish staff, walked through every street of the parish. Now the procession is still done, but only every Sunday afternoon. Our parishioners really appreciated this, as it allowed people to see the Blessed Sacrament not only on the screen, but also to bring it closer to the people. It is a symbol of Jesus visiting and passing through people's homes.

One of the earliest virtual Masses I participated in was for Palm Sunday. It was a quiet and peaceful day. I cut two young palm leaves from our garden and waited for the 8 a.m. Mass to start. I was sitting near our garden, breathing in the fresh air, and savoring the quietness of the place, since vehicles have been banned from our road due to quarantine rules.

Before the online Mass, some guidelines were suggested as to how we could have a meaningful virtual liturgy. These included fixing a schedule — a time when you will participate the Mass and not be doing other things; preparing a specific place for prayer — making sure it is quiet and nothing can disturb your attention; preparing a small altar with candles; preparing physically by dressing appropriately; participating and not doing any other work, turning off or closing any other applications on a cellphone or computer (especially instant messaging!) that can disturb you; and not doing any household works while joining online Mass and

receiving spiritual Communion.

I was ready for the blessing of the palms — which was done online for the first time in my life. With my eyes fixed on the screen of my Android phone, I focused myself on the celebration and imagined myself connected with the thousands of people viewing the online Mass. It could be possible, this virtual or digital liturgy — especially with the situation we are in.

I do not want to make any comparison about whether digital/virtual Mass is of lesser value than being physically present at Mass. Although it is a much different experience when we can see, feel, hear, smell, touch, and taste — personally experience — the celebration of the Eucharist with our senses!

Furthermore, I appreciate more how the Catholic Church has moved to open its doors to the digital world, reaching out to the faithful and keeping their faith alive in times like these, through the use of social media and technology.

Crisis has not hindered the church from finding ways to nourish our faith life, even given this challenging situation that the world is facing today. These virtual gatherings for worship and prayer have been real experiences of connection and faith for people who cannot leave their homes.

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In our community, we had a daily prayer, the celebration of the Word, and a Communion service together. We participated in virtual Masses individually.

Nevertheless, as I asked some people what their thoughts were with regards to virtual Mass, they raised different comments and challenges:

- For one mother, it is a struggle to stay focused on the Mass; the kids feel comfortable running around the house and cannot stay put in one place. She has to watch over them and this distracts her focus at the Mass.
- Some find it possible to be united in celebrating virtual Mass, since it depends on one's disposition.
- For others, the sense of community is lost since the gathering in their house is limited to family members only. For them, it is better when the church gathers together with a bigger community.

- For some, The time and effort spent for God are reduced, since people just turn on the cellphone or television and can access the Mass they want to participate in anytime.
- There is also the sad reality that those who do not have available technology — like television, cellphones, laptops, or internet connection — cannot participate at all in any virtual Mass.

I believe that Jesus cannot be confined in a structure or any place. God is present everywhere, especially in the heart of a believer. We can experience God anywhere, including the place we least expect God to be — like the virtual space! And we can experience God any time, if we focus our hearts and minds and listen to God's words, and receive Jesus — conscious of His loving presence wherever we are. It is how we value our relationship with God through the sacrament that matters most, whether we participate virtually or are physically present at Mass.

When we love, we give time, we make an effort, and we focus on the one we love. We can be in our own homes but still feel the connection with God and our fellow believers through virtual worship. Likewise, we can be physically present at the Mass — but our mind and heart may be in a different place.

Whatever means we have to worship and celebrate the Mass, we must recognize that Christ is always making himself present to us, his real presence.