News

Dan Wahlman, fish fry organizer and co-chair of the fish fry committee at Guardian Angels in Oakdale, Minn., stands by a display Feb. 3, 2021, that will be used for the curbside-only events at the parish this Lent. (CNS photo/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

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Parish fish fries, which are a traditional Lenten staple, have changed course this year in Minnesota due to pandemic restrictions.

Some parishes are canceling them while many others are offering curbside pickup but acknowledging that they are missing out on the tradition of gathering together.

Guardian Angels Parish in Oakdale has offered curbside pickup as an option for its fish fries since 2017.

In 2020, its first of three fish fry dinners was offered as curbside, sit-down or takeout, just as planned. But when COVID-19 hit, the second meal was curbside only, and the last one was canceled. This year, its three dinners will be curbside only since the parish has a large kitchen area to work in and off-street parking where people can line up in their vehicles.

But not every parish in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis plans to offer a fish fry this year.

As of mid-February, of the 109 parishes and service organizations contacted for the 2021 fish fry listing in The Catholic Spirit, the archdiocesan newspaper, at least 24 said they will offer one or more Lenten dinners this year. Twenty-six parishes said they decided not to hold one this year. For nearly 60 others, plans were still unclear.

Fish fries can be major fundraisers and they help build community, organizers said.

While Our Lady of Lourdes in Minneapolis hadn't decided whether to cancel its fish fries, it looked likely, said Mary Asp, parish administrator and chief of operations. Its past two fish fries in 2020 were canceled after the state's March 25 stay-at-home order.

"We'll miss it," she said, adding that the fish fries are more about fellowship than fundraising.

Guardian Angels Parish has a system in place that it used in the fall with curbside chicken dinners, and the proceeds are used to help maintain the parish's homeless shelter, church and grounds.

Diners place their orders online and choose a 15-minute pickup window so that orders can be delivered quickly to waiting cars. Patrons pull up during their reserved time slot, give the name to an outside greeter who confirms the order, places a numbered sticker on the car window and radios information to a volunteer inside.

The volunteer writes the number on the family's order ticket and gives a runner the numbered ticket and food for delivery.

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St. Pius V in Cannon Falls, which normally hosts a fish fry every Friday in Lent, with about 300 people at each dinner, will host just one fish fry, with curbside pickup Feb. 26. Patti Kocur, parish business administrator, said the fish fry is not a significant fundraiser but is more about getting people together.

In the past, some proceeds were directed to confirmation students' participation in a mission trip. This year's confirmation students asked that the money be given to a women's shelter.

The Church of St. Albert the Great in Minneapolis decided not to offer a fish fry this year because of coronavirus concerns. "Our fish dinners are events — with music, bingo, raffles and lots of activity," said Erin Sim, office manager. "We'll wait until we can welcome folks back the way they expect to be welcomed."

The fish fries are a major fundraiser, Sim said, but it's "the fun aspect, the volunteering, the happy people that make the fish dinners what they are."

She expects that other fundraising will make up the difference from canceling the fish fries. Proceeds from all fundraisers are applied toward parish operating expenses.

Epiphany Parish in Coon Rapids has offered sit-down fish dinners for more than 20 years, and about 600 people attended each week, said Rhonda Dillon, director of catering and hospitality. It served two weekly dinners last year before the pandemic-

related restrictions took effect.

This year, Epiphany is switching to a drive-through fish fry every Friday in Lent. The new system is likely to take fewer volunteers compared with the parish's sit-down dinners, said Jill Warren, volunteer coordinator for the fish fries. "We won't need as many dishwashers or as many people in the serving line." And no need to set up and bus tables.

This year, the parish also is taking orders from senior citizens in assisted living on the Epiphany campus and at a senior residence and delivering the meals.

"We're looking forward to seeing how God uses us for this to continue," Warren said.