

COVID-19: Altering the Status Quo

Final thoughts on Parish Life and the Pandemic

CONSIDERATIONS BY MARK MOGILKA

RETURN RATES

Initial conversations regarding the impact on the reengagement of Catholics in the life of the Church offer three scenarios. The first, suggests that following the imposed “Eucharistic Fast” there will be a pent-up hunger that will result in increased attendance at Mass and a possible renewal in the Church. The second scenario is that despite the “opening of churches” given parishioner fears and the fact that most people age 60 and up will be discouraged from attendance, reopening will be a (1-2 year) long, slow process. The third scenario suggests that many Catholics will have developed new habits and approaches to their spiritual lives, enjoy the virtual Mass in the comfort of their own homes and that the significant decline in weekend attendance and giving that was already well-documented prior to the pandemic will only be accelerated in the post-pandemic Church.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Several studies concerning Mass attendance rates following the 9/11 terrorist attacks showed a significant rise that was sustained for several months. However, for most areas of the country these increases were not sustained beyond those several months and the attendance rates at Mass then returned to pre-9/11 levels.

“ONE-QUARTER OF US CATHOLICS say they have SCALED BACK Mass attendance (27%) or REDUCED the amount of money they donate to their parish (26%) IN RESPONSE to the recent reports of sexual abuse and misconduct.”

(Americans See Catholic Clergy Sex Abuse as an ongoing Problem - Pew Research Center – posted on website June 11, 2019).

This, combined with the current experience of parishes and giving may exasperate the financial viability of dioceses and parishes for some time to come.

- What might sports and Mass attendance have in common today?** In a recent USA Today article concerning the likelihood that fans will return to sporting events following the pandemic, it was reported “Only 6% of respondents to a Harris Poll said that they would go to a game as soon as they are able, while 36% said it would be four months or longer before they would attend a sporting event.” In a Seton Hall Sports Poll, “72% said they won’t return to games until there is a vaccine – something that is at least 12 months away.” “76% said they’d watch broadcasts of games without fans.” (USA Today – April 13, 2020).

USA TODAY ARTICLE

HARRIS POLL

6%



SAID THEY WOULD GO TO A GAME AS SOON AS THEY ARE ABLE

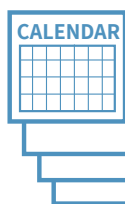
SETON HALL POLL

72%

WON'T RETURN TO GAMES UNTIL



THERE IS A VACCINE



36%

IT WOULD BE FOUR MONTHS OR LONGER BEFORE ATTENDING SPORTING EVENT

76%

WOULD WATCH BROADCASTS OF GAMES WITHOUT FANS.



An April 13, 2020 posting on the website for National Golf Foundation reported on “Core golfer sentiment towards government restrictions on play.” Of those 18-34 years of age, 67% didn’t support restrictions, while among the 65+ age group only 30% didn’t support restrictions. Conversely 55% of those 65+ supported restrictions while only 26% of those aged 18-34 supported restrictions.

OBSERVATIONS

As of this writing it is very difficult to predict the short- and long-range impact on the Catholic community in the United States though we are beginning to see some signs. Several questions arise:

- Will there be a post 9/11 return to churches? Can that return be sustained?**
- With the following in mind, is it likely that there will be significant loss of membership and income for parishes in the United States?**
 - Even when churches are “opened,” anticipate recommendations for those over 60 years of age to continue to stay safe at home until such time as there is a vaccine

- Communities should support those age 60+ years for not engaging in face-to-face small group (golf study) activities, much less large group (baseball study) activities out of their fear for contracting the virus.
- The reality is that in most parishes it is those individuals who are ages 60 – 74 years who provide a majority of the volunteer and fiscal capital needed to run parishes
- Parishioners’ “comfort with digital” may further erode the desire and actual rates of Mass attendance for all ages of Catholics.
- There will likely be a significant number of unemployed and under-employed over time as the economy slowly rebounds.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Due to anticipated reductions in contributions to diocesan operations—a trend that was already under way prior to the pandemic—it is likely that many diocesan offices will need to reduce the number of staff available, and reorganize to make the best use of available resources due to the pandemic. Since the mid-1980s twenty dioceses have filed for bankruptcy and had to reduce staff, dispose of property, and determine what would be essential diocesan services. A study of how these dioceses made their decisions as to what services were retained and which were eliminated would be helpful for dioceses that may have to undergo reorganization due to the pandemic.

“A poll from PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) found that MOST AMERICANS (77 percent) OPPOSE EXEMPTIONS from stay at home orders for religious groups and that even when exemptions are granted, most Americans are STAYING HOME anyway.”