



With seminaries like Toronto's St. Augustine's re-opening in September, it will be a different experience due to the COVID reality. (Register file photo)

Seminaries reopen in a pandemic world

BY QUINTON AMUNDSON
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Six months since seminarians were sent home as a precaution against the rising tide of COVID-19, Canadian seminaries are only now recommencing community living, formation and on-campus lectures.

The 44 pupils residing at St. Augustine's Seminary in Toronto are essentially in a bubble for at least two weeks from when classes resumed Sept. 14.

"For the first two weeks, we are limiting as much as possible, almost restricting, the seminarians from leaving the building," said Fr. Eric Rodrigues, St. Augustine's vice-rector. "All of our activities and meals will be indoors, and we are asking that everyone wears masks in the public spaces like the hallways, chapel and dining rooms."

Distancing will be encouraged through a couple of means. Students will be assigned seats in every classroom and there will be three separate cohorts for liturgy celebrations: the five pre-theology students, the six spiritual year learners and the remaining 33.

If a student or faculty member displays COVID-related symptoms, there is an isolated area of the seminary that will be used for rest, recovery and meals.

Students requiring quarantining would not have to worry about falling behind in coursework as every course will stream live. Adding streaming was an essential adaptation as Rodrigues figures about two-thirds of the faculty do not live at the seminary.

The rules will likely become less restrictive depending on how the first two weeks of the school year go from a safety standpoint.

Based on what he's seen, Rodrigues expects the relaunch to go well.

"It's only been a few days, but all the seminarians are good with following the guidelines and protocols," he said. "We have all been living with this situation for over five months now, so everybody is used to masks, washing hands, sanitizing and distancing. I find there is a good spirit of co-operation."

St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ont.,

shared a detailed re-opening plan on its website. Some of the safety guidelines include masking in all public areas of the building (particularly when social distancing of two metres cannot be ensured), no outside activities, food services staff will only provide meals for the residents and courses will be offered in a blended delivery (some in person, some online).

Isolation will be provided for residents exposed to COVID-19 or those in close contact with someone identified as positive.

At St. Joseph Seminary in Edmonton, the 32 students and six live-in priests will have to abide by social distancing in classes, at meals and in the chapel. No visitors are allowed and the public is restricted from attending Masses.

Fr. Stephen Hero, rector of St. Joseph's, says the power of community formation is pivotal.

"It's better for their formation to be together in person as much as possible even if there's going to be a different way of living together in community," said Hero. "At least when they're in the building, the guys can pray together in person and can have conversations rather than being isolated."

The 33 high school students and 20 college-age scholars must complete a two-week quarantine upon arrival at Seminary of Christ the King in Mission, B.C. Distancing and masks will be required and self-assessments will be regular. Monthly home visits will no longer be permitted. Options to facilitate parents visiting the boarding school are being examined.

The chief priority for Fr. Benedict Lefebvre, the prior of Westminster Abbey, is re-introducing in-person learning.

"The main conviction is that formation is best when it's on campus," says Fr. Lefebvre. "Community life is so formative. We are together for liturgy, for classes, for common activities. ... You just don't get that when you have classes online and you are just in your room at home."

(With files from The B.C. Catholic and Grandin Media)

Stewardship builds communities of faith

Have you returned to church since the re-opening in June after the lockdown? How did you feel about the changes you saw?

A couple of weeks before the re-opening, a parish priest friend from another diocese called to share with me the challenges he had faced in getting enough ministers (volunteers) to serve in his parish due to the COVID-19 safety protocols for places of worship. In fact, getting parishioners who were ready to serve during pandemic was also our concern in Toronto. However, the reports from parishes around the archdiocese have indicated that the re-opening of our churches has generally gone smoothly.

As some ministers have decided that they were not ready to serve at this time, the positions that have been made necessary due to the COVID-19 safety protocols for our churches — liturgical ministers and the newly created and necessary ministry of cleaning, responsible for the cleaning and disinfection of churches before and after Mass — have been filled. The generosity of the ministers has helped the churches continue to serve the communities.

This encouraging response by our parishioners can be attributed to the awakening of the spirit of stewardship in our parishes, a fitting development with the celebration of the first Stewardship Sunday on Sept. 20.

In 2018, as part of the Archdiocesan Pastoral Plan, Cardinal Thomas Collins instituted a Stewardship Pilot Project to help promote the Christian stewardship way of life in our parishes. From the spring of 2018, eight parishes, including Our Lady of Peace, participated in the project. The pilot project helped us examine the many different ways to engage parishioners to share their God-given gifts of time, talent and treasure in their parish communities. Over a one-year period, the stewardship committees of the parishes participated in monthly webinar meetings offered by a team from the Office of Formation for Discipleship at the Archdiocese of Toronto and led by Leisa Anslinger, the Director of the Center for Pastoral Vitality, Archdiocese of Cincinnati, Ohio.

The team guided us to examine and to reflect on stewardship as "an expression of discipleship, with the power to change how we understand and live out our lives." We recognized that even though our parishes already have ministers serving in various ministries, the word "stewardship" was misunderstood and a few parishioners do everything.

So, how do we inspire our parishioners to participate in fruitful stewardship? The project has given us some insight into what are considered to be best practices. These include ideas for stewardship in liturgy,

spiritual formation and social activities, practices that have helped renew the spirit of stewardship in several parishes in other dioceses.

We also learned about the effective communication methods suitable to our parishes to help with our parishioners' understanding of stewardship. We recognized that although our parishes may be different from each other because of the location or the backgrounds of the parishioners, activities like the celebration of Installation and Recognition ceremonies for ministers, Ministry Fair and creating an atmosphere of hospitality such as coffee Sundays have helped transform parishes into stewardship parishes.

At Our Lady of Peace, last October during our first Stewardship Week, we had lay witness talks that invited parishioners to reflect on their call to use their God-given gifts to live out their baptismal promises as faithful stewards.

This year's celebration of Stewardship Sunday comes at a time of uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it can be an opportunity to reflect on how best to adapt our stewardship practices to meet the unique challenges of our current situation. It calls us to be creative and proactive in engaging our ministers who may not be in active ministry and also to attract more parishioners to become faithful stewards.

In his Pastoral Letter on Stewardship in 2018, Cardinal Collins wrote: "Stewardship is so deeply rooted in the foundational themes of the Gospel that it involves a permanent and continuous re-orientation of our approach to discipleship, and so provides a stable base for the life of faith in our communities."

In fact, the life of faith in our communities is reflected on the blossoming of the fruits of the Archdiocesan Stewardship Project, the fruits being expressed during this COVID-19 pandemic. Since the lockdown, some ministers have been working behind the scenes to help run the parishes and to serve those in need in our communities. As the pilot project is extended to more parishes, it is our hope that more parishioners become involved in igniting the fire of stewardship in our parishes.

The reality of this COVID-19 pandemic is that despite the reduced attendance at Mass and reduced spiritual and social activities in our parishes, parishes will always be in need of ministers. Our celebration of Stewardship Sunday reminds us that when we strive to embrace stewardship, we transform our parish communities into vibrant places of Christian living where we serve to make the love of Christ real and present.

(Fr. Acheampong is pastor at Our Lady of Peace Parish in Toronto.)



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