

# The spiritual frontline

*Reflections of a pastor on a journey of spiritual support in a pandemic*

On a cold afternoon in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I took my shopping trolley to go for some groceries.

When I arrived at the store, there was a line of a few people standing quietly six feet apart from each other in front of the store, some wearing face masks, waiting for their turn to enter. Inside, I saw some hard-working staff stocking the shelves and cashiers working behind tall screens. I walked back home with my groceries with a feeling of gratitude to the staff in the store.

That evening, I saw a series of commercials on TV: one thanking those who work at health care facilities and those who provide essential services, and one reminding us to stay home. We can all acknowledge the great work of the health care workers and the grocery store workers referred to as the frontline staff. These and many other people are working hard to save lives, to keep us healthy, safe, make us strong and happy during this COVID-19 crisis.

Having worked as a hospital priest in the past, I recalled what I would have been doing in a time like this — celebrating the sacraments but of course unable to say Mass due to “social distancing,” and offering support to patients, staff and family members. But now, as a parish priest with pa-



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rishioners practising the much-needed social distancing, I have become disappointed that I can not celebrate the sacraments and be with parishioners to offer them support.

Remembering that just before the health emergency parish priests were involved in several activities, including sacramental preparation, I felt frustrated. I realized that my life as a parish priest has drastically changed. I acknowledged that in order for me to continue to spiritually support the parishioners in this time of crisis, I would need to re-imagine how I would serve them.

I need to be creative, proactive and reschedule my activities to figure out what can be done under these circumstances. With the support of a couple of office staff working mostly from home, we have continued to run the parish by doing what we are able to do concerning administration and finance.

What would I do to discharge my spiritual duties? The information from the Archdiocese of Toronto telling us what we can and cannot do, together with the



Our Lady of Peace in Toronto, complete with arrangements of fresh flowers, looked very different this Easter compared to its usual full house. (Photo courtesy Our Lady of Peace Parish)

current restrictions, helped me discern what needs to be done and to prioritize my work.

Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad) writes that “our worship becomes pleasing to God when we devote ourselves to living generously and allow God’s gift, granted in prayer, to be shown in our concern for our brothers and sisters” (104).

Every Christian is called to pray, and prayer is part of the role of every priest. I have created more time for personal prayer and for the Divine Office, focusing more prayer now on the community in crisis. My daily celebration of the Mass has become more outreach-oriented. In a time of a pandemic, the Mass setting emphasizes the importance of saying Mass even

without people present. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and praying the rosary have become more frequent exercises for my spiritual growth as I pray for God’s people.

I connect with the parishioners by directly sending them messages regularly and by calling them, especially the elderly and the shut-ins, to check on how they are doing. Sunday homilies are not only posted on the parish website, but are also e-mailed directly to parishioners for their spiritual nourishment.

During the Holy Week and the Easter Triduum celebrations, I was able to take parishioners through every celebration with a commentary and homilies. The parishioners were able to see on the website what the inside of the church

looked like as we moved from one celebration to another. Certainly, this Easter was a new experience for all of us.

Reaching out to the parishioners is my way of telling them that I am there for them and that the parish is still alive.

Ministering as a parish priest in this situation has been very challenging. However, the situation has made me see the priesthood with new eyes of faith and from a different perspective.

I have experienced the generosity and the closeness of the parishioners in a special way — we are all on a spiritual journey together. God is with us on our spiritual frontline.

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

## Faith organizations join forces for Earth’s sake

BY BRIAN DRYDEN  
Canadian Catholic News

### OTTAWA

A coalition of Catholic and other faith-based organizations and social justice groups are joining forces in a new initiative to unify the voices demanding action to address climate change.

The campaign, called “For the Love of Creation,” launched April 22, the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. It sets out several ways they hope to harness the “long history of work in ecological conservation, environmental activism and advocacy for climate justice.”

“We come together as people of faith in

the hopes of making a meaningful contribution in the next decade towards a sustainable future for all life on the planet,” said an April 22 statement announcing the initiative supported by 20 organizations.

A spokesperson for Development and Peace, the international development organization of Canada’s Catholic bishops, said the COVID-19 pandemic shows that we are interconnected around the world and that solidarity in the fight against the pandemic can be a template to address issues such as climate change.

“All of us have an opportunity to come together for a just economy, for economic integrity, for ecological integrity, for the right relations with Indigenous people,” said

Genevieve Gallant, the director of public engagement for Development and Peace. “We want to do better. As people of faith, we want there to be a just and sustainable future for everyone on the planet.”

“For the Love of Creation” focuses on three themes: a theological exploration of God and creation; increasing public dialogue and building a consensus for action; and engaging in political advocacy, which includes urging government to “meet and ultimately exceed” Canada’s climate-change commitments and incorporating Indigenous knowledge in climate solutions.

The way governments in Canada have co-ordinated efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19 is an example of what can

be done if governments work together, said Karri Munn-Venn, senior policy analyst for the Ottawa-based Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ).

“We have seen what our governments can do if there is political will to act quickly,” she said, adding that the next decade is “crucial” if society hopes to significantly address climate change.

While Munn-Venn acknowledges “our plans on the ground have shifted with churches closed right now,” she said she has “been encouraged that a lot of people have reached out and want to get involved.”

Organizations that joined the initiative are committed to working together for at least 18 months.