Over the past six months you and I have learned a lot about worshiping “remotely.”

We learned how to Zoom for prayer meetings. We learned to FaceTime and YouTube our Masses. We longed for the day when we could return to Mass—as many of you are already able to do. We are making the most of being remote.
From a spiritual standpoint, however, “remote” is a paradoxical word. Although we have been remote physically, we are never remote spiritually from God.

God is for us; God is with us; God is within us.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, walks with us in good times and in the not so good. He not only hears us when we call out; He is already with us unseen, waiting for our “shout out.” When you and I are in need—and there have been many occasions of genuine need during these past COVID months—Jesus is with us. He gives us the strength and grace and comfort to move forward.

We who follow Jesus are united for all time in a vast community of love and prayer. Our ancestors in the faith, many of whom are saints, pray for us from above and are with us. Many of them are our loved ones who have passed—spouses and parents, siblings and friends. And many who pray for us are still with us. While we may be physically remote from each other, as the Church, the family of Jesus, as the Body of Christ, we can never, ever, ever be alone or remote spiritually from one another.

You and I have and have had many prayer partners as we continue to face the challenges of the pandemic.

For several months, we could not gather physically for the sacraments. COVID prevented safe places for Confession or the public celebration of the Mass. First Holy Communions and Confirmations had to be delayed out of a necessary precaution for the good of all. We all felt the loss of not being together in person for prayer. When I had to make the decision to close our church buildings in mid-March, it was, as I have said on a number of occasions, one of the toughest decisions I have ever had to make as a Bishop. I had to explain that it was because the Church values and protects every human life. You tried to understand. Above
all, I was encouraged to hear how many of you spoke up loudly about how much you value the Eucharist in your own lives. We were and are spiritually present to each other!

So many of our people—you, our people—have lost jobs or had your hours cut back. So many of you are hurting deeply and are in need of the prayers and encouragement from all of us. At the same time, so many of our parishes and Catholic Charities stepped into the gap with emergency assistance. We bore one another’s burdens. For them, I am profoundly grateful. We were and are spiritually present to each other!

Loved ones died, often isolated from family. For many months we could not gather for wakes, funerals or even burials. Our priests continue to work hard to offer comfort in these heartbreaking times. They are now offering memorial Masses for the departed. These provide comfort for the emotional pain of a delayed funeral, but we all recognize that the delayed funeral added spiritual pain to emotional pain. We were and are spiritually present to each other!

The loss of work and the closure of churches have had a major impact on our parishes. Our priests together with your parish staffs have been nothing short of heroic. Like so many of our parents and grandparents who had to make due in the lean times of the past, our priests and staffs are doing their best with far less resources and far fewer co-workers. Lay leaders have stepped up in many important ways to organize ministries, food pantries, online rosary groups, online Alpha and Christlife, discipleship forums, to name a few. We were and are spiritually present to each other!

The diocese has had to make many cutbacks as well. One of the first and most difficult was to suspend publication of the *Pittsburgh Catholic* newspaper.
The paper had been struggling financially for nearly two years. We were already planning to make significant changes to its publication schedule. Because its distribution was mostly at Mass, and the advertising income it relied heavily upon was tied to that distribution, there was little or no way to continue its publication. The dedicated staff of the paper was the first to feel the force of its shutdown. Despite their longstanding dedication to the Church and to our diocesan weekly, we and they faced the harsh realities of COVID.

My staff and I all recognized that this decision had a difficult impact on parishioners who relied on the Catholic for news of the Church. This column marks the first online-only edition of a new *Pittsburgh Catholic*. It is beginning modestly with a much smaller staff than the print edition had. My prayer is that it will grow and that we will eventually have a print edition at least quarterly. In the meantime, I am asking our parishes to use [THIS LINK](https://thepittsburghcatholic.wpcomstaging.com) to place it on their parish website and make printouts for inclusion in parish bulletins for those who are not online savvy. My hope is that these efforts can spread the good news about what's happening in our diocese and beyond so that you can catch up on news of the Church. It's not ideal. But it is a step in the right direction. It's another example that we were and are spiritually present to each other.

In the midst of the challenges we have met, so many of you have inspired me with your faith and good works. You continue to advance the reality that our diocese is “On Mission for The Church Alive!”

The Spirit continues to breathe new life in us. One of the visible signs of that reality is the fact that we have the largest entering class of seminarians in many years. Fourteen new men have entered Saint Paul Seminary (in addition to the returning seven seminarians), beginning (and continuing) the many years of discernment and formation that may lead them to ordination as our priests.
Pray for them. They are already praying for you. At the beginning of the lockdown in March, when the seminarians went home to continue their studies “remotely,” they began a ministry of prayer for all of you. They invited you to submit prayer requests through THIS LINK so that they could pray for your intentions. They continue to do so, caring for you as part of the communion of saints even though most of them are years from ordination. They were and are spiritually connected to you.

In each and all of the COVID experiences, we have looked beyond COVID and to our Christ to be “there” for each other and to be “here” with Christ.

Over the course of these past COVID months, we have heard the lingo “new normal.” What “new normal” looks like has not yet come fully to light.

But in some small way, this article is an attempt to go “back to the future” by building on the past, standing on the shoulders of our ancestors in passing on the Good News today and in the days, weeks, months and years ahead. In good times and in the not so good—we, you and I, are here for each other and for Jesus. We were and are spiritually present to each other!
Celebrating Labor Day at St. Agnes Church

Despite unforeseen challenges of merging multiple parishes during a pandemic, one determined pastor has found ways to bring God’s people together while keeping them safe.

St. Thomas the Apostle became a new parish on July 1. Since then, Father Dan Sweeney has led a Feast Day Mass, organized volunteers to renovate a parish building, held outdoor school fundraising celebrations, restarted the parish fish fry, conducted a well-attended Vacation Bible School, and has resumed faith formation in-person and remotely.

Nine churches are part of the new faith community in Munhall, West Mifflin, Whitaker, Duquesne and Homestead. Across the diocese, 29 groupings have
merged since last year to form new parishes.

Parishioners who feel comfortable venturing out after months at home are wearing masks, social distancing and using lots of available hand sanitizer.

“We’re taking every precaution and the people are responding,” Father Sweeney said. “For the most part they are very happy. It’s about belief in God.”

Babette Butler, who grew up at St. Therese of Lisieux Parish in Munhall, has attended many of the events. The first was the parish Feast Day Mass on July 3, which included welcoming new converts, followed by a cookout with live music and fireworks.

During the months of lockdown, “I missed receiving communion,” she said. “It’s also been nice to get out of the house and see people at the different churches.”

Parish teens normally fix up homes in Appalachia every July. This summer they stayed home at “Camp Corona,” enlarging the St. Agnes social hall and installing a new roof.

The annual parish festival at St. Therese was replaced by a Summer Celebration, with food booths spaced far enough apart to pass an inspection by the county health department. A Labor Day Celebration took place in St. Agnes’ parking lot. Friday Fish Fry’s are back at St. Maximilian Kolbe Church, preceded by the Divine Mercy Chaplet. An Apple Festival was held September 20 at St. Therese, complete with hayrides, pumpkin painting and a meatloaf dinner.

“We do eat well!” said St. Therese principal Jon Cuniak, who is grateful for the events that have helped make up income lost due to cancellations. “Father Dan loves to bring people together. Things are moving.”
This week parishioners are heading to Lancaster, PA via motorcoach (seats socially distanced) to see the stage production Queen Esther. A trip is planned in late November to the Opryland Resort in Nashville, TN.

St. Thomas the Apostle Parish also continues to operate a food bank, a bereavement ministry, and to visit the homebound, according to pastoral associate Lori Ellis. A dozen weekend Masses are celebrated at eight churches. Faith formation is held at St. Rita and St. Therese, with options for home schooling as well.

Despite the pandemic, Butler feels a sense of growing unity.

“New people are volunteering,” she said. “It’s nice to meet a lot of them who I didn’t know. The church family has been a big part of my life.”

*Hayride fun at the Apple Festival*
Summer celebration at St. Thérèse Church
Walking with Jesus along The Way

SEPTEMBER 25, 2020

Categories: News
Tags: Featured, Parish Life

For Catholics who have discovered a relationship with Jesus through the ChristLife or Alpha ministries, a new discipleship opportunity, The Way, offers a next step into deeper spirituality.

“People encounter Jesus in ChristLife and get excited about Him. But the question is, where is He going to lead me if I follow Him? What is He going to do in my life?” said Michel Therrien, president of Preambula Group, which sponsors The Way. He was formerly on staff at the Diocese of Pittsburgh as president of the Institute for Pastoral Leadership and director of evangelization.
The Way, an 8-week experience held in person or on Zoom, resembles a weekly retreat for 20-25 participants. They reflect on scripture about Jesus’ relationships. They read and discuss *Interior Freedom* by Catholic spiritual writer Jacques Philippe. Therrien offers short reflections.

“It’s a guided journey together where we move through a series of different spiritual topics from interior freedom to prayer, healing, forgiveness, faith, intimacy with God,” Therrien said. “They are all meant to help people get to know Christ more deeply and to recognize Him when He shows up inside our hearts. I think a lot of times God speaks to people, but they don’t know it because they don’t recognize his presence or voice.”

Jack Porter, a member of St. Pio in Blawnox, had long pursued a deep spiritual life. He registered for The Way – then known as Discipleship Forum — to find a community of Catholics with a similar goal.

“We met on Zoom, but I found you can make a real connection with people,” he said.

The book was a page turner, participants said.

“You just want to keep reading and reading. I had to slow myself down, to take in what I had read in the first few chapters and continue later,” said Judy Abbs, a participant from Ss. John & Paul Parish in Franklin Park.

Her experience started shortly after her annulment following a difficult divorce years earlier. The Way helped her focus on God’s call to “accept our past, forgive – not really forget, but know that we’ve learned from it and move on,” she said.
She came away from the program understanding “that I can live in the moment, not fear the future and I can come up with new dreams and hopes. That will only make me be a better disciple.”

One of the Preambula Group board members is Don Lovre, a parishioner at Ss. John and Paul who had been co-chair of the parish’s Our Campaign for The Church Alive! fundraising initiative. Lovre was captivated by Therrien’s vision of “getting out there and talking to people about Jesus in their own comfort zones, outside the Church.”

Participation “gave me an opportunity to look inward at myself and build my relationship with Jesus.”

One of the most important messages to him was about authenticity.

“Jesus loves me for who I am. Don’t try to be someone you’re not. Jesus walks with you,” he said. “It’s not all yellow brick road. You stumble, you hit potholes. There are many personal and professional things you run into. But it spoke to me about examining myself and my role as a Catholic.”

Registration is open for The Way discipleship forum. The fee is $50 for in-person and $35 for online. Learn more and register at https://mtyryou.org.
In classrooms and gymnasiums and on playing fields, Catholic students are cooperating with new health and safety protocols, while understanding there are no guarantees in the age of COVID.

School athletic officials are stressing the safety message for young people playing football, soccer, volleyball and running cross-country this fall.

“I think we did a good job explaining the expectations, restrictions and guidelines to our student-athletes and parents,” said Sean Cannon, athletic director at Blessed Trinity Academy in Glenshaw. “Should we fail to follow the rules, no matter how we feel about them, we run the risk of losing a season.”
Temperatures are checked before games and meets, players and runners must wear face masks and socially distance when not competing, and fan attendance is limited.

“Our students and parents have been great,” said Joe Luvara, varsity football coach at St. Louise de Marillac School in Upper St. Clair. “The kids listen because they want to play and they understand the season could be cancelled at any time. And parents have been shouldering more of the load, cleaning uniforms and equipment nightly.”

Rob Glentzer, coordinator of the diocese’s soccer league, is aware of the fluid nature of playing sports during a pandemic.

“What we knew yesterday might not be true today,” he said. “We believe it’s in the children’s best interests to play sports if we can do it as safely as possible, realizing we can never eliminate all risks.”

In addition to the health benefits of physical activity, “young people learn life skills such as working together, communicating, good sportsmanship, humility, showing charity toward others and gaining self-confidence,” Glentzer said.

“So far, the plan is working well,” said diocesan athletic director Gary Roney. “Parents continue to make sacrifices in order for their children to participate in sports. Nobody cares more than mom and dad.”

Luvara commended Roney and the diocese for helping coaches organize leagues this fall. “The eighth graders especially wanted to play football and get ready for high school,” he said. His Trojan squad has started 2-0.
“I’m not surprised the kids are following directions,” Cannon said. “They missed playing and being with their friends during the spring season. It’s really gratifying to see what they can do when they’re really motivated.”

Roney looks at the big picture.

“Playing sports helps our young people grow,” he said, “and it gives us an opportunity to evangelize.”

_Blessed Trinity 4th graders Annalise Good (left) and Callie Kandravy_
North Catholic High School girls cross-country team won an invitational Sept. 19-20 at White Oak Park
During these long months of the pandemic, we have become frustrated and tired. Displays of anger, hatred, bitterness and violence fill our news channels and social media screens. Hearts have hardened. But that’s not what Jesus wants for us, or from us.

As Catholics, we feel called to emulate Jesus and create positive change. But how? We are human. Creating positive change takes energy, which many of us lack after months of stress and anxiety. When we think of how to make our community or our world better, we can feel overwhelmed. That may lead to guilt and more frustration.

Where can we find hope? How can we share love?
Try starting small.

“Not all of us can do great things. But we can all do small things with great love.”
-Mother Teresa

Read that quote again. Let its power sink in.

In the midst of busy days, frustrations and fears, we often overlook the importance of the little things we do. What little things are on your daily “To Do” list? Folding clothes? Packing the dishwasher? Taking out the garbage?

None of those things take long in the grand scheme of things. However, those little moments link together to make up our hours...our days...our weeks, month, years, and lives. Could our lives be more joyful if we made a serious effort to “do small things with great love”?

I say yes. In fact, I’ve tried it, and it works.

Instead of getting frustrated over washing the kids’ sports stuff, take a moment to smile and thank God for healthy children who are able to play sports. Trade frustration over doing the dishes (again) for a smile, while thanking God for the blessing of good food for your family. And yes, instead of being mad about having to take out the garbage – well, that’s a tough one to celebrate, but you get the point.

Go deeper. Use those minutes for quick private reflections on the good things that surround each chore as you complete it.

If this sounds like crazy talk, ask Jesus for help: “Please help me to do small things with great love. Please soften my heart and open my eyes to see and feel all the
good things I have around me. Help me to be more appreciative of all that I have been given.”

My experience is that those mundane moments suddenly become precious opportunities for conversations with Jesus. Intentionally welcoming Him into our hearts in the little moments helps us build a stronger relationship with Him. Quality in-between-Sundays time with our Lord makes us realize that we are never alone.

There’s so much love in that! Wrapping our small things in the love of Jesus enables us to do great things with confidence because we know He is beside us. Our world needs the great things we each have within us.

No matter how desperate life may seem, we each need to remember that His plan for us is greater than anything we could imagine. That plan starts with us showing up for the small things, with hearts full of love.
Take 5 with Father Joe Mele

SEPTEMBER 25, 2020

Categories: Columns
Tags: Featured, Take 5 with Father

Father Joe Mele is the administrator of the Morningside/Shadyside/Stanton Heights grouping.

I always wanted to be a priest. I think that was the way it was in my generation. I struggled a little with the calling in high school but once I entered the seminary, I knew this was what God was calling me to do. I have been very happy ever since! The desire to be a priest, to love God and neighbor, to be bound more closely to Christ and to spend myself entirely for souls is the cause of my joy.
2. **What is the most meaningful aspect of your ministry?**

Without a doubt, the most meaningful aspect of my ministry is beginning each morning with a Holy Hour and then offering the Mass. I try very hard to celebrate the Sacraments in a way that inspires and invites full and active participation from every member in the congregation. I believe a priest’s principal duty is to pray for his people and try hard to lead his parishioners to holiness rooted in a deep personal relationship with Christ.

3. **What is the most challenging part of your ministry?**

I find happiness every day in the priesthood, but I believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is without a doubt the greatest challenge I have experienced in my 47 years of ministry. The biggest challenge is determining how to bring Christ to my people without being physically present with them. I am sure that saddens every priest right now.

I have always loved engaging my people and interacting with them on a deep and personal level. The pandemic has changed how that I do that. One way I minister to people amid the pandemic is by visiting my parish’s amazing young adult group during their weekly socially distanced bonfire after evening Mass. These are strange times but the blessings far outweigh the obstacles we must face.

4. **What do you wish people knew about the priesthood?**

I believe with all my heart and soul that the priesthood is a supernatural gift. It is a divine inspiration to work as a priest. I also believe without any question that the soul of a priest is changed forever when he is marked by an indelible seal at his ordination. I rely on the graces of my ordination for courage and hopefully humility as I go about my ministry.
I humbly accept that through my priestly ordination, I am made into another Christ, but I am still just a man, a brother, a friend and hopefully a good shepherd. Like any person, I have my own hobbies, interests and favorite foods. I also have successes and failures. I have learned over the years that my complete surrender to Christ brings not only personal satisfaction, but also an indescribable joy that I want to share with everyone I meet.

5. **What is your hobby, or what do you like to do in your free time?**

I have enjoyed taking parishioners on pilgrimages to Europe and other places. That was always fun for me. I also enjoyed power walking, working out and playing racquet ball. People are surprised to know I used to play the bagpipes. Now, I have slowed down a bit. I still enjoy taking walks but not as far or as fast. Like my dad, I love gardening and tend a rooftop garden. I love animals, so I feed the local bird and squirrels. I always had a dog until recently. I miss my dog Bayley very much. I am an avid reader and am currently studying the poet Michael O'Siadhail. I am also reading *Overground Railroad* by Candacy Taylor and *The Irony of Modern Catholic History* by George Weigel. But my favorite way to spend free time is a quiet dinner with a few friends or family.
Father Mele's dog, Bayley