Pandemic porch concerts build community

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Tags: Diocesan News, Featured
When the pandemic forced Pittsburgh and the rest of the world to shut down a year ago, Wil Kondrich immediately thought of his fellow musicians and sound engineers, and the clubs where they worked. How would they survive financially?

Kondrich, 27, who grew up at Word of God Parish, also considered how he could help his Swisshelm Park neighbors who were stuck at home. He and his band started staging acoustic shows Wednesday evenings from his front porch on Pocono Street. They also collected donations to help live music venues and charities.

Neighbors and dog walkers stopped to listen, and interest grew.

Saint Patrick’s Day marked one year of raising money, and spirits.

“My family loves listening to music,” said Kondrich. “The clubs are in dire straits. Right now there’s not really any live music opportunities.”
Recently they raised funds online and in person to support Moondogs in Blawnox, and the Kollar Club and Excuses on the South Side.

“Our neighbors have been great,” he said. “Everybody started having more and more fun. They love this. It helps to build community.”

The police stopped by on March 17 to check on the large crowd.

“There were no problems,” said Wil’s father Keith, who is a deacon assigned to Saint Joseph the Worker Parish and serves as a chaplain at the Allegheny County jail. “In fact they told us that neighborhoods need more of this, people just getting to know one another.

“Now more neighbors stop and talk, and there’s a sense of belonging. They also feel good about helping local charities.”

Wil Kondrich learned to play the piano at Word of God School, switching to guitar in the eighth grade. He played in the jazz band at Central Catholic High School, then started his own rock group.

His youngest brother Tommy, a senior at Central Catholic, plays drums in the porch concerts. Mom Helen, sister Lily and brother Ted also are supporters. Dad runs the livestream feed at https://www.facebook.com/wil.kondrich.

Neighbors have been mindful of COVID mandates, including wearing face coverings and socially distancing when not with their immediate family.

“I would say we have made a difference in helping people get through the pandemic,” Kondrich said. “I’ve had many people come up and say, ‘This is the highlight of the week.’ That’s been ultimately very fulfilling to me.”
“Music has always brought people together,” he said. “If it helps one person. That’s good enough for me.”

*Friends and neighbors gather for the one year anniversary of Wil Kondrich's porch concerts.*
Bishop David A. Zubik

The very first article that I wrote for the *Pittsburgh Catholic* was in the summer of 1990. It was entitled: “No be worried!” and was a reflection on the anxieties we face in our lives.

At that time, I shared the story of my maternal grandmother, in whom I confided much, especially about my own worries. My Porchy (the nickname I gave her) immigrated to the United States from Slovakia in 1920. She never fully captured English grammar but her messages were truly from her heart. When I shared with her my anxieties, her response was always the same: “No be worried!”

My grandmother was woman of great faith. While she didn’t have much formal education, she knew God and she knew about Him. I suspect that her advice against worry came from her knowledge both of God’s words and His ever-abiding presence with us.
As I reflect with you on my grandmother’s words, I began to think about how many times God speaks those words in the Bible.

Remember Abraham. When God tapped him to be the father of many nations, Abraham was frightened. God responded: “Don’t be afraid!”

When our dear Blessed Mother was visited by the Archangel Gabriel with the news that she would become the mother of the Savior, she too was frightened. God’s words to her: “Don’t be afraid!”

When Joseph was understandably perplexed and upset by unanswered questions about Mary’s pregnancy, God sent the Archangel Gabriel to him in a dream with the words: “Don’t be afraid!”

After Saint Peter had an amazing catch of fish, at a time when he thought it was nearly impossible, he was frightened. Jesus said to him: “Don’t be afraid!”

When the apostles were in a boat being rocked by a terrible storm, Jesus came upon them and said: “Don’t be afraid!”

When Mary Magdalene came to the tomb on the first Easter morning and found it empty, she didn’t recognize Jesus in the garden. She was frightened, and Jesus said to her: “Don’t be afraid!”

From the heart of God to her own lips, my grandmother was right when she told me: “No be worried!”

So, what about you and me? As you and I fast-forward through our days, how do we receive God’s words: “Don’t be afraid”? How do those words sound when you’ve
been diagnosed with cancer, or you’ve lost your job, or you don’t have enough money to pay your bills, or you face foreclosure?

How do you respond to those words when your spouse cheats on you, or you’re addicted to booze, drugs or gambling, or you haven’t heard from your adult kids for several years, or somebody has said something about you that is clearly false, or your body is breaking down in your senior years?

How do those words sound: “Don’t be afraid”?

Is God for real when He asks us to not be afraid?

He sure is!

But let’s get something straight. God recognizes that moments of fear are real. God is not asking us to deny the fear that comes with cancer, foreclosure, divorce, abuse, aging, unemployment, addiction, loneliness or betrayal.

How do we know that? Because of what Jesus Himself went through.

When Jesus went into the desert in anticipation of His public ministry, He was all alone—except for the devil. And He was afraid.

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane anticipating His imminent betrayal, He was afraid.

When Jesus was on the cross and felt forsaken by everyone, including His Father in heaven, our Lord was very much afraid.

Fear is a normal, natural response to real threats in our lives. Jesus felt fear because He was fully human, as well as fully God. You and I should not be
ashamed of our fear.

But God does not leave us in fear, because God does not leave us. His response to our fear is found in words spoken by the angel to Joseph in one of his dreams: “And they shall name Him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’”

When you and I think about the fears that Jesus faced in the desert, in the Garden or on the hill of Calvary—in all of these moments Jesus knew that His Father, our God, was with Him. God is also with you and me, offering support, strength, guidance and peace.

Yet there’s something else that we need to think about. When God says, “Don’t be afraid,” God is also speaking from His own fear. How can it be possible for God to fear? After all, God is perfect!

What God fears is that our fear might drive us away from Him; that our fears will break our relationship with Him.

When we face a great moment of fear, we are tempted to blame the problem on Him.

At the very time we have an opportunity to learn important lessons about life and grow closer to God by trusting Him with our fears, we are tempted to turn our backs on the Lord and bolt. As we are literally hell bent on blaming God as the cause of our fears, it is important to remember (as my Porchy did) the response of our ancestors in the faith, such as Abraham, Mary, Joseph, Peter and the apostles, and Mary Magdalene. When God told them, “Don’t be afraid,” they trusted. They trusted in Emmanuel—“God with us.” Their trust allowed Him to carry them through their fears.
The same can be true for you and me. And when we follow their lead, we also help to alleviate Someone Else’s fear—God’s. We can emulate our ancestors in the Bible and take away God’s fear by not falling into the temptation of blaming Him and by not turning away from Him.

And so, as I share with you once again that beautiful advice given by my grandmother, “No be worried,” I hope you and I can take her advice to heart. Why? Because God is Emmanuel. God is with us.

No be afraid!

Photo credit: Justin Merriman
COVID-19 delivered a blow to parishes and caused much suffering and hardship. But one year after the pandemic began, pastors say they have also witnessed many grace-filled moments, countless acts of charity, a recent rise in Mass attendance, and new ways of gathering families to learn and live the faith.

When 800-plus kindergarten through sixth graders in the religious education program at Saint John XXIII Parish switched to at-home learning, moms and dads had to jump in. For many, they began to formally teach the faith for the first time. A parish survey showed that 70 percent found it to be an enriching experience.

Meanwhile, the parents of seventh and eighth graders listened in as catechists taught their children online.

“In the domestic church, parents are the first teachers of the faith,” said Beth Jesserer, director of faith formation. “Some were re-learning what they had been taught years ago, but they caught on fast. God gives you the grace to get through it.”
Father Bob Miller, pastor of Saint John XXIII, recalled that having to cancel Masses a year ago “was one of the scariest times in my life.” However, the parish began to livestream services immediately, and after reopening church doors has been diligent in maintaining safety protocols.

“I'm hopeful for the future,” Father Miller said.

The Great Grouping of Parishes in Franklin Park, Ambridge, Conway and Baden has worked hard to stay connected to parishioners through Masses and outreach, according to Father Jay Donahue, their pastor. But he acknowledged one of the greatest difficulties of coping with the coronavirus.

“The most painful part of the pandemic has been people sick and dying alone,” he said. “It's suffering we carry in our hearts.”

As joblessness jumped, the grouping quickly expanded its food pantry at Good Samaritan Parish, offering boxed pantry items, non-perishables and a weekly hot meal. The pantry also teamed with the American Dairy Association to hold two milk giveaways.

“There is victory in all the losses we've felt,” Father Donahue said.

Volunteers assist at a food and milk giveaway at Good Samaritan Parish in Ambridge last fall.
Holy Family Parish in Oakmont, Plum and Verona already had been livestreaming Mass as part of an evangelization initiative. The parish added more livestreams and simulcast services to its website, social media and on FM radio.

In communicating changes involving ministries, “We were very blessed,” said Father Kevin Poecking, pastor. “We had introduced Flocknote on Ash Wednesday last year, and thousands of parishioners were already enrolled.” The service sends text and email messages to help keep people informed.

Father Paul Zywan became pastor of Triumph of the Holy Cross Parish in Jefferson Hills, Pleasant Hills, West Mifflin and Clairton in the middle of the pandemic last July. Recently, he has seen an increase in weekly Mass attendance.

“People are thirsting to come home to the Church,” he said. “It makes our work of evangelization that much more important.”

The parish is looking to reach out to the homebound and is involved in intense planning for middle school and youth ministry.

Father Joe Freedy also came to his new assignment last July in Franklin Park, Bellevue and Emsworth, remembering, “The fear factor from the virus was pretty high,” with much confusion about how it was transmitted.

“Most parishioners have returned,” he added. “The way we’re handling things is quite safe.”
Buildings are reborn

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Amid many challenges of merging multiple churches into a single parish while following COVID-19 restrictions, three new parish centers are now serving parishioners.

Mary, Mother of God, Our Lady of Hope and Our Lady of Mount Carmel parishes used funds mostly from Our Campaign for The Church Alive! to repurpose existing space into functional offices.

Two of the parishes renovated former school buildings while a third transformed an unfinished church basement into its parish center.

“Our pastors are doing their utmost to discern what buildings will best serve the needs of their new parishes,” said Linda Ritzer, diocesan secretary for Parish Services. “They are taking into consideration all the unique characteristics of the buildings in deciding how they can meet all the many needs of their parishioners.”

Mary, Mother of God’s new parish center is located in the basement of Saint Angela Merici Church in White Oak. Construction began last July and the space was ready in January. It includes parish offices, a social hall, youth ministry room, choir room, conference room, and storage space.

“We are so excited about our new Parish Center. It is going to help us to come together as a new parish and to set hearts on fire with the love of Jesus Christ,” said
Father Terry O’Connor. He has created a virtual tour of the new parish center on the parish website, www.marymotherofgod1.org.

Our Lady of Hope Parish is using the former Saint Germaine School in Bethel Park for its new administrative offices.

Saint Germaine’s campus sits in the geographical middle of the new parish boundaries and is accessible via Baptist Road.

“The school building is a perfect spot for the offices, as it boasts many classrooms on a wide floor plan that can accommodate most of our unified staff,” said Father John Skirtich, pastor. “With minimal remodeling and expense, we have been able to more closely collaborate.”

Upgrades to electrical and HVAC systems, and phone and internet services turned former classrooms, school administrative offices and a kitchen into new staffing space.
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, in Ross, McCandless, West View and Observatory Hill is also using a former school as its new parish center.

In January, all clergy and staff moved into the new parish center located in the former Saint Teresa of Avila School. The building was completely remodeled. Classrooms became offices and meeting rooms. Existing furniture, copy machines and other materials were repurposed from all four church and office spaces.

“For more than a year and a half prior to the establishment of the new parish, our four congregations worked together to share our resources, staffs and experience,” said the pastor, Father John Rushofsky. “Having laid the foundation, we are excited to move forward with a united purpose, grateful for our past and full of faith in the future.”
Our parishes after the pandemic

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Categories: Columns
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Faithful Chronicles

By Father Frank Almade

Ten years ago, I flew to Tokyo, Japan, to officiate at the wedding of my cousin John, and the love of his life, Kayoko, in the chapel of Sophia University. I have vivid memories of an unfamiliar culture: foods I had never seen; the blazing neon rainbow of signs in Japanese characters; the sheer volume of people on sidewalks and jammed into subway cars; and masks.

Yes, masks. Almost everyone on the street wore a mask. This was 10 years ago, before awareness of coronavirus, or H1N1. I wondered why they did so. Because of germs, I was told. People packed tightly in together in hi-rise apartments and office towers respected the risk of catching a cold or the flu.

This memory returns as I ponder what parish life might be like after we have tamed the COVID pandemic. I know, we are not anywhere near that point. But, blessedly,
many of you have already received, or are scheduled to receive, a COVID vaccine. That is a vital step toward ending the pandemic

When that happens, how will parish life change? Allow me to speculate about several ways we may practice our faith differently.

First, we will have a renewed appreciation for the Eucharist. Could anyone have imagined what happened a year ago, when the bishops temporarily suspended the obligation to attend Mass? No. But the bishops acted to protect lives. When church doors closed, live-streamed celebrations of Mass allowed people to hear the Word of God and open themselves to the grace of the sacrament, even if distantly. However, it is an imperfect solution.

We are not called to worship in isolation from our sisters and brothers, much less in pajamas with a cup of coffee nearby. Most of us know that deep in our souls.

As we move forward, I believe that our appreciation of the real presence of the Real Presence of the Eucharist will increase. We should never take for granted that the wonder of gathering in our churches to receive the Eucharist.

We will affirm the teaching of the Church that Christ is present in our midst when even two or three are gathered: Christ present in the Word of God proclaimed; Christ present in the Sacrament consecrated by the priest and consumed by the people; Christ the Real Presence in the tabernacle; and Christ present in the baptized and confirmed members of his body praying together. Christ is really, really with us in the Eucharist.

Whether or not everyone returns to Mass, those who do must surely have a deeper appreciation for Christ’s presence to us in the Eucharist.
Second, we look forward to again holding parish festivals, fish fries, and all manner of social gatherings. In the past, most of these were fundraisers for the parish and its many ministries, for evangelization or social outreach.

While we will continue these fun activities, their primary purpose must become social — praying, celebrating, mourning, deepening relationships, working on projects, just enjoying each other’s company.

Fundraising will need to become a deliberate act of each individual and family. We see this already, many generous parishioners send their parish contributions to the office even though they cannot come to Mass. This is Christian stewardship. This is thanking God for all he has blessed us with, giving back to his Church a certain and substantial portion of all we have received.

Each of us must become a loving, grateful and generous steward of God's gifts. A few do it by tithing, others by putting bequests in their will. Most do it by their weekly, monthly or quarterly donations. We can't wait for the next fundraiser. Christian giving is a spiritual discipline that we must practice as regularly as prayer, as a similar act of daily faith and love.

Third, before the pandemic we were all guilty of labeling our brother and sister Catholics. I know I have done so. We say, “He’s a fallen away.” “She was divorced.” “He’s a traditionalist.” “She’s a radical liberal.”

That was wrong and is wrong. Such labels are harsh and negative. None of us is or ever will be perfect Catholics. All of us are sinners. That’s why we call ourselves “practicing.” We try to move toward holiness as Christ wants. I hope the pandemic helps us to reject harmful labels, and treat every baptized Catholic with the respect due a child of God.
Circling back to Tokyo, I do see us wearing masks for quite some time to come. Not because we like it, but to protect each other. Time will tell. In the meanwhile, take every opportunity to grow closer to Jesus in devotion, in generosity and in love for our sisters and brothers.

Jim Judkis photo
Together for Holy Week

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One year after the COVID-19 pandemic forced church doors to be closed, pastors are inviting everyone who can to attend Holy Week services that commemorate Christ’s triumph over death.

“Jesus died on the cross for our sins, and in the Passion we join in His suffering,” said Father Kris Stubna, pastor and rector of Saint Paul Cathedral Parish in Pittsburgh’s Oakland, Greenfield and Hazelwood neighborhoods. “On Easter Sunday we will celebrate what is at the heart of our faith—He is alive.”

Bishop David Zubik will be at the cathedral for most of those liturgies, which will be broadcast, livestreamed and posted on YouTube for those unable to attend in person.

“It’s edifying to see so many people returning to Mass,” Father Stubna said. “They are hungry for the sacraments. Confessions are on the increase.”
Palm Sunday begins the annual remembrance of Jesus’ Passion, recalling His entrance into Jerusalem, where a crowd placed palm branches in His path as a sign of homage. The sacred journey continues through His arrest on Holy Thursday and crucifixion on Good Friday, to Holy Saturday, when Christ’s body lay in the tomb.

Together, these holy days are known as the Easter triduum—from the evening of Holy Thursday to the evening of Easter Sunday.

Palms will be distributed this weekend. However, due to COVID there will be no ritual washing of the feet on Holy Thursday, veneration of the cross on Good Friday will include a bow or genuflection, and holy water fonts will remain empty.

In Butler Area Catholic Parishes, Father Kevin Fazio said that Masses and services will be held in person, livestreamed and available on cable television.

“We’re starting to see more folks returning to church,” he said. “With these various channels, we are well-positioned to reach as many people as possible.”

Holy Spirit Parish of Lawrence County will celebrate Holy Week in three of its seven churches, according to Father Joseph McCaffrey, the pastor. The churches in use—Saint Mary, Saint Vitus and Saint Camillus—all have a hall or a gymnasium for overflow attendance which will allow for safe social distancing.

Holy Spirit Parish also will celebrate Easter Sunday Mass at 10 a.m. in the parking lot of the former Sears store in New Castle, where parishioners have been attending drive-up services since last June.

“Holy Week gives us an opportunity to come together,” Father McCaffrey said. “Many of our people are longing to get back to the sacraments.”
It’s hard for Catholics to stay at away at Holy Week, because it is at the heart of the Christian faith.

“With the Resurrection, we have everything we need,” Father Fazio said, “for life now, and life eternal.”