

# St. Francis Church in Jerseyville has First Private Mass, Others Following Same Practice Over Weekend

by Jeff Allsman, Executive Director  
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JERSEYVILLE – The church is not a building, but a body of believers with a purpose to worship God. But for many, the church, the actual building, still stands at the center of life and culture. The church remains a source of hope. But what happens when the church is a part of the danger?

With the coronavirus spreading rapidly, the church as an institution is forced to consider its role during a time of crisis. The data suggests that what the world needs now is not our physical presence, but our absence.

Responding to the challenge of social distance compliance, many religious communities are suspending their typical operations and seeking other options to deliver the Word. Part of the Christian message is that God comes to us in ways that defy our expectations.

With limited choices to spread the gospel, the church is ironically turning to the culprits often blamed for the relational disconnect among its human membership. Technology and social media are becoming the platforms upon which rests the virtual pulpit.

“It won’t be the same right now as it was before,” said the Rev. Father Marty Smith, pastor of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Jerseyville Pastor of St. Patrick Catholic Church in Grafton, who recently launched a delivery of Catholic mass on Facebook. “But, how ironic it is that going forward the very thing seemingly tearing people apart is the tool that will bridge us through this.

“We call it the ‘new evangelism’,” he said. “People can still hear the spoken word of God even though they aren’t there. I think they can draw strength from knowing that Mass continues. The passage of time always brings opportunities for changing methods to deliver the unchanging message. We know we can trust in God and experience that He is with us in all things; even fear and uncertainty. And I think in the end people may find that, as in Lent, giving up something temporarily – in this case gathering together as a congregation -- makes us long for it even more.”

Father Smith celebrated Mass for the first time without a congregation on Friday, March 20, at St. Francis.

Since March 18, all Masses in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois have been closed to the public in an effort to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Priests have been offering private Masses with their personal Mass intentions being offered “for the people.”

There are many platforms for live streaming and archived viewing. And the idea is not new to church leaders seeking to advance the gospel to the masses. But Fr. Smith now has the advantage of delivering his live stream message as a simulcast on Facebook, YouTube, the churches web page and other platforms. Riverbender.com helped get the streams ready and they being delivered through Riverbender.com's stream service.

And so, members of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church, and anyone really, can view the daily mass Mondays through Saturdays at 9:30 a.m. Sunday Mass will be simulcast at 10:15 a.m. Viewers can find the live stream at [www.jerseycountycatholicchurches.org](http://www.jerseycountycatholicchurches.org) and then click on the St. Francis button. Or they can watch live on Fr. Smith’s Facebook page or Father Marty Catholic Watch Party YouTube channel.

“Everyone wants to hear a message of reassurance,” he said. “When we see unprecedented things happen in our nation like all sports canceled and everyone told to stay inside and churches are closed worldwide it’s daunting. But people should remember that Jesus taught us that every valley is followed by a mountain and every cross a resurrection.”

Several parishes statewide will begin offering live streaming of Masses this weekend.

“I ask our local church to embrace this spiritual sacrifice together, with the intention of an end to the spread of the coronavirus, for the healing of those afflicted by it, and for strength for those who are providing care for the afflicted,” Bishop Thomas John Paprocki of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois said. “I also pray that this fast from the Eucharistic will draw us closer to our Lord and cultivate a hunger and new appreciation for the Blessed Sacrament.”

And so, the church’s absence, its literal emptying, may function as a symbol of its trust in God’s ability to meet us regardless of the location. The church remains the church whether gathered or scattered. It might also indirectly remind us of the gift of gathering that we too often take for granted.

[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)