

# MINISTRY WHILE FLATTENING THE CURVE: PERSPECTIVE OF AN ASSISTANT PASTOR

(AN INTERVIEW WITH FR. ANDREW SCHWENKA)

**How and why did you come up with the ideas of live streaming the Mass and other devotions?**

When news about the need to practice “social distancing” began to go around, our parish and school leadership team began to think creatively about how we could reach out to our people remotely. Being bombarded with the constantly changing situations and panic that is often portrayed in the news, we recognized the need to provide something familiar to people as a kind of antidote to the chaos of everything else to help ease their fears or anxieties and, above all, to proclaim the Gospel and remind everyone that Jesus is Lord. In trying times, our mortality and need for God becomes more apparent to each of us so we knew that we had to be there for our people as much as possible, meaning that we needed to do some new things.

Side-note: I am very proud of how our teachers, administrators, staff, students, and priests at our parish, school, and in our diocese have responded to this chaos. They’ve had to rethink and recreate essentially the entire way that we normally operate, and they’ve had to do it in about a week, all-the-while experiencing technology crashes from overuse as every other institution tries to do the exact same thing. The people who run and work at the companies and businesses that we partner with to provide these formats are matching our efforts as they try to make improvements behind the scenes by buying more hardware and updating their software as quickly as possible to make it as efficient and reliable as possible. It’s like having one computer in a family, and everyone wants to use it at the same time but at a much larger scale and much more complicated. Businesses accomplish this all-the-while being required to send most of their people home to work remotely, which they had never done before. It just reminds all of us that we rely upon thousands of other people even for the simplest of tasks like turning on a lightbulb. If it lights up or if I have food to eat today, it means that someone got up, did their work, made sacrifices for people they may not even know, and provided a great good to my life that I should not take for granted. And it all depends on God, who causes and orchestrates it all.

**How do you see providing Mass, other sacraments, and other offerings as a part of your ministry?**

The entire purpose of the priesthood is to provide the Sacraments and care for the people of God. The Sacraments are the most essential part of what we do as priests. The situation that we find ourselves in, and the necessary precautions that we must have in place, are difficult for all of us. It’s difficult for parishioners who have limited access to the Sacraments. It’s difficult for bishops and priests because there is nothing that we desire more than to provide the Sacraments to our people. But I also think that we can either be bitter about it, or we can look for new opportunities to make the best of what we have been given and what we can actually control. Sometimes we choose our sacrifices and, other times, our crosses choose us. I believe that people will find their desire, love, and appreciation for the Sacraments growing during this

time of abstaining from them. Perhaps this will be the most meaningful Lent of our entire lives and will change our appreciation for the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

**Did you ever think being a priest ordained only ten months that you would have to deal with an issue such as a pandemic?**

I don't think anyone could have anticipated the unique circumstances in which we are now trying to minister to our parishioners. But the Gospel must be preached and that necessity has forced us to think creatively. I think that one skillset that my generation of priests are able to offer the Church during this unusual time for ministry is a certain level of fluency in how social media and technology platforms work and how they can be used as tools to reach people in a new way because we have grown up with them. I was 13 when Facebook was created, so as a junior-high student, we all got it right away because we could connect with friends after school. Now, I never expected to use social media in my ministry as much as we have the last few weeks, and I think there are better ways to minister to people. But we will make the most of it while it is needed.

**What additional equipment did you buy in order to facilitate the broadcasts of the sacraments?**

We can broadcast on our parish Facebook page with just an iPhone, a wifi connection, and a tripod to hold the phone. That's all that is needed, and it can even be done by just one person if necessary. However, when the news about the coronavirus and possible requirements for social distancing and quarantines began to be spread, I reached out to a few friends who are involved in photography and videography to ask if they would be interested in temporarily loaning us some of their equipment or buying it from us after we were finished with it. They agreed, which has allowed us to increase the quality and sound of our videos and better quality tends to hold an online audience's attention better.

**Can you explain to me briefly and readers the equipment and process you use to livestream and record Mass and devotions?**

(See previous answer.) For better quality videos, you could use any camera that is able to record video or even some of the newer phones have excellent cameras too. Because technology improves so quickly, there is sometimes a significant increase in quality from one generation to the next. However, getting a using an actual camera is not always the best option because they are sometimes harder to use.

What you gain in quality by using a nicer camera, you also need to match in your ability to use that equipment. If it's too difficult to use, you'll end up just not using it. And there's no point in owning equipment if you don't know how to use it. This past week has been a steep learning curve for us as we try to gain the knowledge and skills required to do it as well as we can. Fortunately for us, YouTube is not only a way that we can reach our people, but it is also a great resource for finding videos on learning how to do most of these things.

The other challenge that we've had to balance is one of the heart. We can't let the perfect be the enemy of the good because perfectionism can cripple progress. (As we've all heard Scott Frost say, you can't be afraid to make mistakes.) If people contrast some of our first videos with our more recent ones, they will be able to notice an increase in the quality as we try, fail, and get better the next day. We begin anew—again and again. There's also something good and deeply human about people being able to watch us try, struggle, fail, and try again. We don't see enough of that when we watch professionals do these same things—not because they don't fail but because they can edit it out and put on a false persona of perfection. Our failures also make for a great blooper reel.

While there is certainly better content, even Catholic content, out there that is produced by people who are much more eloquent, articulate, and professional, nothing can replace the personal relationship and connection that we have to our parishioners and community. People don't watch our videos to see a great product or show (although that would certainly help). They watch our videos because they know us and they are known by us. Perhaps this aspect is one that has NOT changed about ministry during this time: it's still about people... and meeting, knowing, and loving them where they're at, even if it is online.

**Any other comments/observations you wish to offer.**

The need to minister to our people remotely is certainly less than ideal. As Catholics we are necessarily *incarnate* people—in our spiritual lives and in our theology. Our greatest treasures are the Sacraments, which are spiritual but also material. As humans, we need a tactile, physical connection because God has made us not just with a soul but body and soul. So, while this may be a necessary way to reach our people for the time being, it is also very limited, and by itself, it won't feed us forever. We *need* the incarnate realities of God's grace in Sacraments. The priests need their people. They need the Sacraments. And we all need the community of the Church by which to grow and be strengthened. We look forward to when we can all gather together again in person. Until then... check us out on Facebook.