

A blurred background of green foliage with a laptop in the foreground. The laptop screen is dark and reflects the surrounding greenery. The overall scene is out of focus, emphasizing the text.

# WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

*As we move back to in-person liturgies and rehearsals, what tools from our journey into virtual gatherings will we choose to keep?*

*By Jennifer Kerr Budzjak*

Earlier this year, Fr. Ricky Manalo, CSP, wrote a two-part article about the particular considerations for liturgy in a livestreaming format. The second and more praxis-based part of “At the (Digital) Banquet of the Lord” was published in the January issue of *Pastoral Music*; the complete two-part article is available to Association members on the *npm.org* website. It is an excellent piece, and it offers a flexible and creative view of how liturgy in this format—clearly never envisioned as a “normal” way for the Church of God to gather, but necessary during this time—might be able to address some of the liturgical and theological values we hold dearest, looked at through the lens of liturgical norms and documents of the Church.

In the final paragraph of his article, Fr. Manalo says, “While the pandemic has upended parish life in many ways, it has also brought an opportunity to connect in new ways, attract new parishioners, and reconnect with those who may have had to move beyond parish and state boundaries. The inherent grace is that the opportunity for online engagement does not need to end when everyone is able to safely gather again but can continue to evolve to meet future parish and pastoral needs.”

That moment when our congregations can gather for safe, in-person, participative liturgical worship is approaching quickly for many parts of the country and already here in others. It prompts the question: What will we do with the equipment and skills we acquired over the past year, the hastily crafted habits and ways that became our “normal” way of functioning during this inexplicably not-normal sixteen-month period? Will our “back to normal” mean “back to the way we did things before”? Or will some of what we learned this year be carried forward in life-giving ways into the new future we build?

In gathering information for this article, I engaged a number of liturgical musicians in conversation about their experiences in their parishes, both during the months of the pandemic and now as they look to the future; some of their thoughts can be found in the sidebars interspersed in this article. I also spoke with Wendy Silhavy, Senior Coordinator of Liturgy and Music for the Archdiocese of Chicago, about her work from the diocesan perspective as we move forward.

I have noted in these conversations three distinct areas where our newly gained skills in streaming, video-conferencing, and video production hold opportunities to enrich the lives and ministries of our volunteers and parishes in the future. This article will examine each in turn, considering how we can integrate what we have learned from our unexpected but enforced embrace of technology, as we engage a less-distanced future and once again gather in person with our communities.

## Staying Connected

It should go without saying that our parish Sunday liturgy should normally be celebrated in-person, in our parish church, with full, active, and conscious participation by all the faithful gathered. Though virtual liturgical worship was for a time the only way we could have any engagement with our parish communities, most would acknowledge that it is a wildly insufficient substitute for real time in-person liturgical celebrations.

That said, many churches, including those that had already begun streaming their liturgies before the pandemic forced the issue, have long embraced the added sense of connectivity they feel with their parishioners through an ongoing online presence. For parishioners who travel, or who move out of the area, young choir members or cantors who leave to go to college—the ability to pray virtually with one’s home parish can be a powerful link for sustaining a connection to the community of faith.

From a practical perspective, ongoing access to livestreamed liturgy from one’s home parish is an incredible gift to community members with limited mobility. Those who are ill or hospitalized, or who move to living situations where they are unable to attend liturgy regularly in person, can still remain connected to the larger community in a genuine and authentic way. If the weather is too bad for traveling, or if one feels unwell and needs to stay home so as not to infect others, parishioners can still have access—not the full, active, and conscious presence at the eucharistic table we all long for, but at least a real and substantive connection—to the Sunday worship of the community.

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## Evangelization and Outreach

In addition to streaming Sunday liturgies over the past year, most of the ministers I spoke with, once their dioceses permitted them to gather smaller groups into the church, have also been streaming parish weddings and funerals. During this time when only small groups of people could gather for these important life-passage rituals, the ability to stream the liturgies to loved ones who could not be physically present was a tremendous comfort for many.

Consider, however, the powerful vehicle for evangelization and outreach that continued streaming of weddings and funerals—as well as first Communion, Confirmation, and other particularly special moments—could be for those who otherwise could not be present. For many non-Catholics, as well as Catholics who may not attend Mass regularly, a wedding or funeral might be their first point of intersection with the parish community in many years, or ever. When that encounter is one of hospitality, compassion, and openness to the movement of the Spirit, it can become the first step in a journey of conversion and belonging. Though obviously this welcome cannot be quite the same over a virtual connection, it still can be one of authentic hospitality, inviting an even broader group of family or friends to come and learn more. As Wendy Silhavy of the Archdiocese of Chicago comments, “entering a church, even a ‘friendly’ one, is daunting when you’ve had a bad experience or have a lot of questions, and an online gathering is much less threatening.” The opportunity for inquirers to “come and see,” as Jesus invites in the Gospel according to John, is yet another opportunity for the Spirit to move and evangelize.

## Formation and Education

This ease of access afforded by virtual streaming and videoconferencing extends to formational events as well, and in this area technology and virtual connection have already transformed our efforts far beyond what was possible in the past. During my own years in parish and diocesan ministry, the greatest challenges were generally less about what formational opportunities to offer than when to offer them; our ministers and volunteers were hungry for ongoing formation, but even the most committed found it challenging to carve out time, especially if coming to events involved driving at night, securing child care, or navigating unexpected shifts to work schedules.

Our ministers’ calendars are beginning to fill up again in a world moving considerably faster than it did during those early static months of our pandemic isolation. Still, during that time, we have learned much about holding meetings and offering opportunities for learning—and doing so in a way that can be both convenient and fruitful. Many have had positive experiences interacting in breakout groups in a Zoom gathering, often finding them to be more efficient and less awkward than similar in-person kinds of groups. Individuals less likely to speak up or break into a conversation around a table can add a quick thought to a chat box to ensure their “voices” are part of the conversation.

The videoconference format also presents significant advantages for presenters, even if some of the “energy” of the room is lost without the ability to be together in the same physical space. In a “live” format, the seamless switch from speech to text viewing to

sharing videos or sound requires a level of technology and connectivity to which few parishes have access; through the several videoconferencing platforms available now, a smooth process for shifting media becomes much more accessible.

These formational possibilities are being explored not just by parishes, but by dioceses as well. Wendy Silhavy describes how the Archdiocese of Chicago has held "several RCIA gatherings virtually over this past year, and some lector training as well. We've also had several town hall meetings to go over directives and the various changes in liturgical and musical guidelines . . . I think everyone is getting more and more comfortable with online real-time content, and I've been surprised at how few technical glitches people experience. And in an area like Chicago, not having to travel and deal with traffic is a huge deal!"

This fall NPM is holding two multi-week virtual workshops; on Monday evenings I will be teaching a course in choral conducting technique, and on Tuesdays Teresa Yoder will present a course in the "FUNdamentals of Basic Theory for the Choir and Cantor." These are the kinds of ongoing workshops we have been unable to offer in the past, due to the challenge of gathering enough participants to study a focused subject, in a single location, over several consecutive weeks. A virtual class, however, can gather interested parties from literally anywhere, and students can have access to recordings of the live sessions after the fact if they are forced to miss one or simply need to review.

Obviously virtual choir rehearsals are anything but optimal, and I surmise that the vast majority of choral directors and their singers would be delighted to

## CHRISTIAN COSAS

*Director of Music,  
St. Charles Borromeo Parish  
Kettering, Ohio*

Our parish has a long history of livestreaming its liturgies—in fact, before I applied for this job five years ago, I used their video archives to research its repertoire and scout cantors!—so the technical aspects were never a big challenge for us beyond the hiccups that come with jumping from 20 views a week to 1,000.

We have many experienced cantors from middle schoolers to retirees and everything in between. I established a rotation that gave our viewers a chance to hear the diversity of our church. We're also blessed to have a "Von Trapp" type of family in our parish, which allowed me to plan a few small choral pieces once or twice a month.

We recorded and produced two virtual choir pieces, which was an experience one longtime member called "bittersweet." He said, "It was great to see so many familiar faces, but sad that it had to be stitched together in isolation." And after seemingly endless

playbacks of both "Silent Night" and my own "Rise Again," I'm not sure I want to endure editing and mixing a production like that ever again.

I know some parishes are hesitant to continue livestreaming after the pandemic, but we don't have many concerns about people preferring it above in-person worship. We'll continue streaming as outreach for the parts of our community who are homebound for any reason, as we have for years. I think we've struck a pretty good balance of giving them just enough to experience with watching liturgy but not be a substitute for worshipping in-person. It's the difference between looking at a postcard of Niagara Falls and actually feeling and smelling the mist around you.

I do think that Zoom meetings and other videoconferencing options have changed and will continue to change the church for the better. No more double booking the same room on Thursday nights! Of course, they come with their own hiccups, between "unmute your microphone" and "screen sharing isn't working today," but overall the technology enables wider possibilities and opportunities.

## IN PRACTICE

never have to rehearse on Zoom again. But consider the benefits of retaining the capability for hybrid rehearsals on those nights when the weather is bad, or a member is ill, or the sitter cancels last minute. After more than a year of not singing together, people are hungry to gather and sing again, but we may find that having the ability to pivot in certain situations could be a great gift at some points in the future.

Finally, consider the possibilities for connection with outside speakers or musicians from around the country or even the world. Where once a guest would need to be flown in, housed, and fed, taking several days of travel for what might amount to only a few hours presenting, videoconferencing technology makes it possible to learn from people and clinicians

we may never have had access to, and opens vast possibilities to parishes who would otherwise never have had the means.

This has been a year of many losses, and we must continue to hold in our hearts and in the heart of God those whose lives and families have been devastated by this dreadful pandemic. But in this time of loss, our world has become a little smaller, and we all may feel a little closer to one another than we were before. All any of us can do, now or ever, is try to keep going, continuing to be Christ's hands and feet in the world.

The future of our ministry is before us. I pray that we may continue to minister, hold onto the new closeness we have found, and remember that however it happens—virtually or in person—we are all connected.

## DEANNA OPPENHEIMER

*Immaculate Conception Catholic Church  
Columbus, Ohio*

With the challenges brought by COVID-19, we learned new ways of doing things and discovered that with innovation, prayer and determination, all things are possible. Our parish had never livestreamed before, but with all hands on deck from our staff and parishioners we developed this program and now have an active livestreaming ministry. Even in post-pandemic times we will use this as a way to reach our homebound parishioners. We have several volunteers, trained by a staff member, who operate the livestreaming program and take turns live streaming our three weekend Masses; some of our teenagers apply their time towards the community service hours they need for their school. We offer live streaming for funerals and weddings, and a trained staff member takes care of this operation.

We have also held choir rehearsals and wedding music planning sessions on Zoom. In a time when

seeing people in person was not an option, this provided a means of community and rehearsal and social time while accomplishing the task at hand. We have moved on to in-person rehearsals, vocal quartets and other forms of live music (all fully masked). Meeting in person for these functions is ideal, of course, and provides the social interactions that we all desire, but it is helpful to now have different options and modes of operation if live and in-person gatherings are for some reason not possible. As a parish and music ministry team, we discovered that with the grace of God and a determined spirit, worship and music for God's glory will continue on!

We may continue using Zoom to plan wedding music for couples who plan to celebrate their wedding at our parish but are living out of town. We have gone back to live staff meetings, and most other events on campus are now meeting in person; we are finding in-person meetings and gatherings to be more productive and enjoyable. On the other hand, some of our professional development and perhaps cantor training may remain as virtual options, for those who cannot attend a live event.

*In Practice: Renegotiating a Relationship*, by Jennifer Kerr Budziak. Excerpted from *Pastoral Music*, June/July 2021, volume 45:3, pp.36-41.