



The Marianists

Being a Marianist Educator During a Pandemic

By Rev. John Thompson

Although I am currently a pastor of a Marianist parish, I always consider myself an educator. I may not be in a school setting as in the past as a teacher, campus minister, chaplain, president or assistant professor, but as a pastor, I too educate with every word, gesture, and look. Ask my parishioners, they will tell you!

To say that life in the parish changed on March 13th when I received word from the Archdiocese that all public Masses would cease and that gatherings were limited to 10 people would be an understatement! We were not ready for something like this to happen. We had no plan, no infrastructure, no experience in handling a situation like this...and yet we did. *Adaptation and Change* was part of the Founder's vision, and *Adaptation and Change* would be the experience of a small parish in San Antonio. I think I changed my middle name to *Adaptation and Change* over these past 10 weeks. Life as we knew it did not exist anymore, so how does one create community, administer the sacraments and keep the lights on when the people are not able to come to Church, be in close proximity to one another, or even venture far from their home except for the essentials...and the Archdiocese and the State deemed Church unessential for safety reasons. So, life as we knew it changed, and so ministry needed to change too!

Now, I am not afraid of technology, but I am limited in my knowledge of, and ability with, technology. I am a Digital Immigrant and not a Digital Native! In this moment, the way to connect with others was through technology. If you did not know what Zoom was before the stay at home directives, now it is almost impossible to finish a sentence without using the term Zoom! *Adaptation and Change*. Our parish had a Facebook page and we were investigating different

ways to draw people more directly into social media. Although I would rather forgo all that we encountered so far during this pandemic, I must honestly say that we would not be where we are today without that push from the corona virus. What we were dreaming about on the Parish Council for some unnamed time in the future, now out of necessity, needed to be active, live, and real, immediately.

The first weekend of the directives, we quickly put together Mass for Sunday using an I-phone and a ready-made congregation from the Magnificat Community (Holy Rosary MLC). We squeezed into the Chapel when the rules for gathering remained at 25. In two days, that number would be limited to 10. We never did anything like this at Holy Rosary, but you know what they say about ingenuity...the mother of invention! We had a few glitches along the way but were able to work them out that week and, in the weeks, following.

Our usual daily Mass attendance ranged between 12-20 people. That would be too many for the new number of 10 and I did not want to take turns with parishioners or some other form of being “fair”, so I felt it was better to suspend daily Mass and offered other ways of connecting with parishioners on Facebook. Through the remainder of Lent, I created a daily God-Cast, a video that incorporated the Angelus, a Scripture reflection, and a song I played on guitar and posted it daily by noon. During this time, a letter was sent out to each parishioner asking them to create a Facebook account and other directives from the parish. The Brothers in our Holy Rosary community formed an assembly line to address, stuff, and stamp each envelope! It was like

I Love Lucy in the Candy Factory! The number of followers on our Facebook account grew over these past 10 weeks from 320 to 1230. We now had followers from the Church, San Antonio, and various states throughout the nation tuning into our Sunday Mass and Daily God-Casts. These additional followers also supported our Church financially! Once Lent was finished, the God-Casts were then limited to twice a week and a reflection on the Scriptures was written for the other three days during the week. All of this was new to me. I never even took a video of me or anything else prior to this situation and now I was writing,

producing and editing video's and writing reflections on our Facebook page where in the past, others posted some pictures of past events and I simply "liked" them or made a comment on those posts. *Adaptation and Change* literally bolstered my and our parishioners experience on social media in a way that did not exist before.

During this time Parish Council members were given a list of parishioners to reach out and check on. Also, the staff contacted those parishioners for whom we did not have a current email address because I wanted to create a Newsletter that would continue to provide new information, updates and a spiritual component that could nourish the community outside of receiving the Sacrament. I took a crash course with Constant Contact and put together our first electronic newsletter. The second issue was sent out this past weekend. *Adaptation and Change*.

Over the past several weeks we also engaged in Zoom meetings with the Parish Council and the Marianist Lay Community. I purchased a subscription so that other ministries could use this platform and remain connected to one another.

Currently, we are preparing for re-opening the Church this coming weekend. *Adaptation and Change*. We will have to put into place some restrictions and policies that will let people know that we are not back to "business as usual" mode. Everyone will need to adapt. Everyone will need to change for the immediate future. But, through these times, we have tried to remain Church and faithful to the Charism...even if it was virtually. Do you think Fr. Chaminade saw this in the glimmer of his eye?

So, even through the pain and isolation of this experience, I can honestly say that I experienced joy and hope in the lives and response of my parishioners, and in their ability to adapt and change to our current situation. This pandemic has forced us to learn new skills (*integral quality education*), virtually feed a community (*formation in faith*), create community in a new way (*family spirit*), continue to care for the needs of the poor through St. Vincent de Paul (*service, justice and peace*) and remain a parish even when the doors were closed

(adaptation and change). Yes, in the good times, and even during a pandemic, it is possible to remain a Marianist Educator!