



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

Mission Dioceses Look Beyond the Pandemic



With a goal of visiting all 29 schools in the Belleville Diocese, Bishop Michael McGovern talks with students at St. John the Baptist Catholic School in Red Bud, Illinois.

By Beth Griffin

Mission dioceses are creative and tenacious in the best of times. They deal with limited resources, extreme distances, and sparse concentrations of Catholics, among other challenges. The 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 demanded immediate responses to the health emergency and mandated shutdowns. It also raised questions about how and when to resume normal parish and school activities.

The Dioceses of Belleville in Illinois and Alexandria in Louisiana shared some of their short- and long-term approaches to help parishioners through uncertain times. Both dioceses have responded to fluid government restrictions on church capacity, and both have installed new bishops in decidedly unique circumstances.

The **Diocese of Belleville** covers almost 12,000 square miles in 28 of the southernmost counties in Illinois. The largely rural area is only 6% Catholic and is gripped by endemic poverty. The diocese uses grant money from Catholic Home Missions in every area of its ministry throughout 101 parishes, including worship, formation, youth, lay and Hispanic ministry, vocations, and education. Judy Phillips, director of development for the diocese, says that early in the pandemic the diocese helped parishes by sharing safety instructions, liturgical guidelines, and sources for cleaning supplies, as well as up-to-date information on changing capacity restrictions when parishes were allowed to reopen.

Some parishes are able to livestream Masses, and others hold “drive-through” services. St. Joseph parish in Marion, Illinois, bought an FM transmitter so that parishioners in the parking lot can listen to Saturday evening Mass through their car radios. The Eucharist is brought to each car. A limited number of people can attend Sunday Mass in the church sanctuary, and others participate in a socially distanced simulcast in the parish center. Pastor Fr. Brian Barker says, “By doing these two things, we are actually under budget and in the black! This allows many more people to receive the Eucharist on a regular basis.”

At Immaculate Conception in Columbia, Illinois, parishioners also gather, weather permitting, for “park-and-pray” radio broadcasts

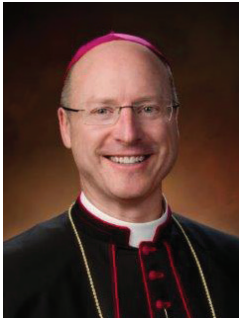
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Neighbors

ISSUE 2 2021

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers
and Sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you! Now that the Easter season has concluded, may the joy of Christ's Resurrection continue through the spring and beyond.

We've passed the one-year milestone in these unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic. First and foremost, we pray for the thousands who have died and for their grieving families and friends. Additionally, we pray for the poor, vulnerable, and unemployed who have been most affected by isolation and loss of income.

Over the past year, we have learned new ways to share the love of Christ while maintaining social distancing in our parishes, schools, places of work, communities, and even with our families and friends. As individuals and as communities of faith, we have also remained faithful disciples, bringing hope to those in despair or experiencing loneliness, the sacraments to the sick and shut-ins, and a prayerful presence in the face of uncertainty and struggle.

Although we continue to pray for an end to the pandemic and for the success of vaccines in stopping the spread of the COVID virus, we know that the long-term effects of the pandemic on churches, schools, businesses, and public gathering places will continue for some time. It is no different in our Catholic Home Mission dioceses.

In this issue, you will see how two dioceses supported by Catholic Home Missions—one in the Midwest and one in the South—have adapted to limited church capacities for Masses and to reduced income due to the economic fallout of the pandemic. These stories illustrate both the resourcefulness and dedication of the diocesan staff, clergy, and lay faithful in our home mission dioceses, as well as the ongoing need for the invaluable assistance they receive from Catholic Home Missions.

Especially in times such as these, your continued generosity to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal makes a positive impact on the dioceses we support. Your assistance helps these home mission dioceses continue their ministries at a time when they are most needed. Thank you for the difference your committed support of Catholic Home Missions makes throughout the United States and its territories.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight
Bishop of Jefferson City
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions



Jean Schutt, a parishioner at Ss. Peter and Paul Parish, Waterloo, Illinois, receives hand sanitizer from parish volunteer Sue Morris before attending Mass.

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of a Mass celebrated from a flatbed truck provided by a local farmer.

Belleville's Fr. Eugene Neff says his diocesan ministry to the sick and aged continues through Zoom visits. The activity director at one convalescent center rolls a cart with an iPad from room to room to allow Fr. Eugene to connect with the residents from his rectory.

In all dioceses of the country, the pandemic has challenged finances. In Belleville, offertory collections are down 15-20%. Judy used grant assistance

"Some parishioners have decided to increase their offering, not because they have more but to help the suffering Church."

to help 24 parishes and all the schools in the diocese to establish online giving mechanisms. Ten other parishes were already using electronic giving platforms.

The pandemic has also prompted personal acts of generosity from people of modest means. Fr. Joseph Oganda at Sacred Heart parish in DuQuoin, Illinois, says, "Some parishioners have decided to increase their offering, not because they have more but to help the suffering Church."

He describes, "I buried a gentleman two days ago. Before being infected with the virus, this kind man of faith would struggle to come to the rectory to bring his church contribution. He said to me one time, 'Father, I know that the Church is hurting during this pandemic, and I have decided to give a little more to help with expenses.'"

Diocesan social service agencies are helping more people and serving more families than before the pandemic, Judy says. "People are pulling together, and I see more cooperation among parishes and between the diocese and parishes, too," she says. She adds that younger people are stepping up to volunteer in parishes and organizations, sometimes filling spots previously held by older parishioners.

The 26 Catholic elementary schools and three high schools in the Diocese of Belleville reopened in August and maintained in-person full-time classes throughout the semester, with the help of a comprehensive daily self-screening program for 6,000 students and staff. Many students come from low-income families. Judy says job losses during the pandemic

have spurred an increase in requests for tuition assistance.

Belleville's Bishop Michael McGovern was installed in July 2020. "It was a beautiful Mass, and everything worked out well, but we were limited by COVID restrictions to 200 people in the cathedral," Judy says. "So many people who would have attended were not allowed to do so."

Bishop McGovern expressed thanks to Catholic Home Missions "for helping us forge a stronger local Church. Because of your generosity, the Church in southern Illinois will continue living our Catholic faith and sharing it across the small towns, farming communities, and urban areas of our diocese."

In the **Diocese of Alexandria**, less than 9% of the population is Catholic. The diocese encompasses 11,000 square miles in rural central and northern Louisiana—an area burdened with poverty, unemployment, and lack of education and work skills. The diocese includes 50 parishes and 22 missions.

The diocese uses Catholic Home Mission funds to support seminary education, Hispanic and campus ministry, ongoing clergy formation, and the permanent diaconate.

Cole Churchman, director of development and public affairs for the diocese, says the statewide pandemic-related shutdown "instilled fear in some people." Parishes responded to the phased reopenings allowed by the government and underscored Bishop Robert W. Marshall Jr.'s encouragement to parishioners to attend Mass "where and when they can," Cole says.

Approximately 15 parishes have been able to livestream Masses, Cole says, and parishioners are figuring out how to "self-disperse" at available in-person Masses to adhere to changing capacity and distancing restrictions.

The diocese received a grant to provide Skype access for chancery staff, clergy, and parish staff. Cole says this technology enhances communication and helps people work from home when necessary.

Although some pastoral outreach, including prison ministry and nursing home visits, has been suspended, Cole says individuals have developed creative workarounds. In one nursing home, a

retired priest offers Mass for his fellow residents.

Cole says the public health crisis struck a blow to the already challenged finances of the diocese. Nevertheless, he sees bright spots. "Prior to and since the shutdown, several parishes set up electronic giving. It has been well received. Those who use it are in love with it," he says.

Electronic giving eases operations and reduces the number of checks that parish volunteer counters need to process, he says. In one parish, an iPad kiosk in the vestibule is popular with young families, who appreciate the convenience and know that donations are reflected on their parish giving records.

Cole says, "People have really stepped up. They are very faithful donors to the diocese and know that the ministries provided are needed." He says Archbishop Gregory Aymond of New Orleans, who was the diocesan administrator in early 2020, made a pastoral decision to scale back the annual diocesan appeal in deference to the health crisis and widespread job losses. "People sent in what they were accustomed to giving to the appeal, despite a minimal effort on our part," Cole says.

Bishop Marshall was named to shepherd the diocese in April 2020 and was installed in August 2020. Cole says the new bishop has met all of the clergy virtually and many in person. Because of COVID restrictions, only 150 people were allowed to attend the installation Mass at the cathedral. Another 90 people were accommodated at a remote viewing site in a neighboring parish.

Bishop Marshall says, "The people of central Louisiana have great faith but limited economic resources. In 2020, our financial revenue has been significantly diminished due to the pandemic, and also to Hurricanes Laura and Delta.

"The grants provided by the Catholic Home Missions have helped us to continue to educate seminarians and candidates for the diaconate, and to provide ministry to our college and university campuses and to the growing Spanish-speaking population of our area. We are so grateful for the support, especially in these difficult days," he concludes.

Mission dioceses have responded with optimism and generosity to the new challenges presented by the pandemic. They have worked to meet the immediate needs of their people and have begun to address the changes in worship, communication, and funding that will likely stretch into the future. Catholic Home Missions is an integral part of that future.



In spite of very strict state COVID regulations, Griffin Center's after-school program was able to continue operation for below-poverty-level children who live in public housing in East St. Louis, Illinois. Sister Julia Huiskamp, D.C., founder of the program, visits here with one of the program's participants.



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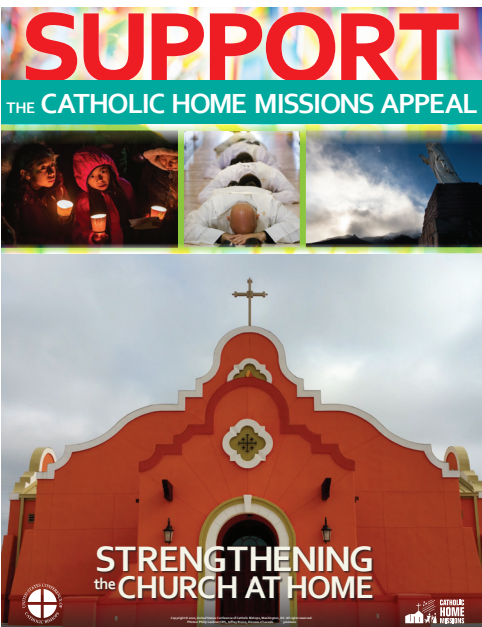
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READ ABOUT HOW

two home mission dioceses are continuing to serve the faithful with assistance from Catholic Home Missions as they adapt to economic hardships caused by the COVID pandemic.

LEARN MORE BY READING

the most recent CHMA Annual Report, past issues of the newsletter, and 2021 promotional materials for examples of CHM's accountability and transparency practices at www.usccb.org/home-missions.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | P. O. Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal.

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