

## Religious Education During a Pandemic

The pandemic did a number on faithful Catholics. Shutting down our churches. Canceling all in-person parish community activities. Limiting sick calls, regular Reconciliation Services and Parish Sacraments, etc. Many of us suffered during a difficult and unprecedented time in our lives when we needed our faith more than ever. How do we inject joy into the hearts and minds of our parishioners and especially our families with children?

The news is not all bad. In the face of this crisis our REP team knew that without in-person classes we needed to do more than sending home their religion textbook. We understood that we could not burden our parents with another requirement to teach religion to their children. They were overwhelmed, stressed and worried about what this pandemic will do to their children's education and their physical and mental health.

After much research and a steep learning curve REP bought a brand-new Religious Education program called *Christ In Us* from Sadlier Publishing. *Christ In Us* was developed to offer parishes a wonderful on-line and interactive program that could be taught by catechists virtually or in-person when permitted. *Christ In Us* provides us with a spiral curriculum which means the same lesson each week was taught to each grade utilizing age-appropriate information and activities.

Over the summer of 2020 our catechists were trained in the use of this new program. They also learned how to use Zoom to teach live classes that they recorded and uploaded to our private REP YouTube Channel. This gave parents the flexibility they needed to keep their children engaged in their faith. Our catechists never gave it a second thought and jumped right in!

We created a monthly REP Newsletter that offered parents simple tips for "keeping the faith alive" and encouraging them to stay connected to STV. We often included informational and inspirational topics to help parents deal with the difficulties and uncertainty of the time we were in.

Here are the unexpected and positive outcomes of this past year's virtual Religious Education:

Parents were more involved in what their children were learning in REP. The spiral curriculum opened up family discussions on faith topics and beliefs.

Parents were being evangelized. Many parents told us regularly that they either learned something new about the Catholic Faith or experienced a spiritual renewal.

Parents were grateful. Parents appreciated our flexibility. They told us that they would never have been able to add religion to their long list of at-home commitments imposed on them by school or work.

With the help of our pastor, Fr. Joe Genito and parochial vicar, Fr. Michael Hughes, we were able to offer additional dates for the sacraments of Reconciliation, First Holy Communion and

Confirmation that met the safety mandates for distance, masks, etc. Their child did not have to lose a whole year of sacramental preparation without receiving the sacraments. A true gift to our Parish in the midst of the pandemic.

Many grew in grace. Some parents, catechists and parishioners shared that they had experienced a renewed love of Christ through making more quiet time for daily prayer, by live streaming the weekly Mass in the intimacy of their own home, and engaging in what their children were learning in REP.

This year we were faced once again with the dilemma of how best to offer Religious Education classes in the safest manner possible. Since the majority of our students are aged 5-11 (K-6) and are unvaccinated, they are at higher risk of getting and spreading the new covid variant. In our Parish Center (where we hold our classes) we are unable to seat students safely 3 feet apart. Unfortunately we do not have the classroom space to meet in person. Also, many parents of these children are still hesitant to expose their unvaccinated kids in the limited space.

After much discussion and discernment and in light of the passion and grace we have encountered, we have decided to continue the virtual REP. We will be hosting Family Faith Activities once a month in the Auditorium or Rosemont Chapel as well as in-person Sacrament Retreats all in the hopes of facilitating opportunities for community building

We ask our parish community to pray for us, our catechists, our students and families as we bring the love of Christ to their homes and hearts. We continue to pray for our parish community as we, "open our hearts and doors" to welcome everyone back!

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