

COVID effects still reduce distribution of Eucharist

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It's been three years since COVID-19 swept the world, and its effects are still challenging some Arkansas churches from distributing the body and blood of Christ.

On March 1, 2020, at the outset of the pandemic, Bishop Anthony B. Taylor suggested temporary Mass modifications be implemented in the diocese to reduce the spread of the virus, including receiving the Eucharist in the hand rather than on the tongue (except Latin Masses), discontinuing distribution of the Precious Blood, forgoing hand-holding during the Lord's Prayer and bowing for the Sign of Peace in place of handshaking.

Twelve days later, the bishop suspended all public Masses and nonessential events. The suspension of Masses was lifted May 4; even after that, parishioners were required to distance themselves and wear masks. The wine restriction remained in place until June 18, 2022.

While most parishes in the state began offering Communion under both species since then,

some have not. Their reasons span from not wanting to spread germs to a shortage of eucharistic ministers to serve.

Father Leon Ngandu, pastor of St. Bartholomew Church in Little Rock and St. Augustine Church in North Little Rock, said his churches only distribute the body of Christ at Masses.

“Many are still concerned about the pandemic,” Father Ngandu said. “We are planning to resume receiving the blood of Christ starting in summer.”

Because the Precious Blood wasn't distributed for two years, churches didn't need as many eucharistic ministers as they did before the pandemic. As people have returned to Mass, finding enough people to serve has been a challenge for some parishes.

“Compared to before the pandemic, there have definitely been fewer eucharistic ministers,” Father Stephen Elser, pastor of St. Paul the Apostle Church in Pocahontas, St. John the Baptist Church in Engelberg and St. Joseph the Worker Church in Corning, said. “Once the Precious Blood was able to be resumed in parishes across Arkansas, we did a training/retraining of eucharistic ministers. I noticed that there were not as many that came to these trainings as there had been in the past.”

Father Elser said he initially thought St. Paul Church would have to reduce the number of chalice ministers at each Mass from four to two, but the parish's eucharistic ministers have ensured there are four, like they had pre-pandemic.

“We found that parishioners were very much longing to receive the Precious Blood, and our ministers were willing to work it out to where we could have four chalice ministers at most Masses once again,” he said.

While Masses are covered, he said one particular area of need is eucharistic ministers to serve nursing homes and the homebound.

“While we had many dedicated ministers who serve in this ministry, we very much could use more help in this area,” Father Elser said.

The largest parish in central Arkansas, Christ the King Church in Little Rock, is also challenged with not enough ministers to cover every Mass, pastor Father Juan Guido said.

“At this moment, we do not offer the blood of Christ for the assembly due to the shortness of the extraordinary ministers of holy Communion,” he said. “After the hardest part of the pandemic, I have seen an increase in the number of people coming back to church; however, getting (eucharistic ministers) has taken a little longer.”

As a result, the church's current eucharistic ministers must serve more frequently.

He said he has plans to reach out to the church's former eucharistic ministers to see if they have interest in returning to the ministry and make announcements at weekend Masses to seek new eucharistic ministers.

Father John Connell, vicar general of the Diocese of Little Rock and pastor of St. Raphael Church in Springdale, said his parish had a shortage of eucharistic ministers since COVID but is near their pre-pandemic numbers now.

“We have had two training sessions and added new ministers to replace those who opted out after the pandemic,” Father Connell said. “Of course, we could always use more.”