
HOW TO TAKE MASS ATTENDANCE *in a Pandemic*





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Each year, dioceses across the United States require their parishes to send in an official Mass attendance count on certain days of the year. But with so many churches closed last year because of the pandemic, many parish leaders had to get creative to find their true numbers to include those who worshiped virtually. Among other U.S. dioceses, the Archdiocese of St. Louis showed that just because church doors were closed, didn't necessarily mean that the faith community was inaccessible.

The Archdiocese of St. Louis consists of 178 parishes that are the spiritual home to more than 500,000 Catholics, according to John Schwob, Director of Pastoral Planning. He admits that taking Mass attendance can be challenging in and of itself, but when you throw in a pandemic, it adds a whole different aspect.

"We've been doing Mass attendance counts in the parishes for 10 years now. Like most dioceses, we do it in October each year. Looking at past numbers, Mass attendance has been declining over the years, which isn't unexpected or unusual given today's climate," he explained. "But when it came time to start tallying the numbers, we knew 2020 would look different due to COVID-19 restrictions and the bishop's dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass. We knew the numbers would be way down. But we also knew that many parishes were offering livestreaming through YouTube, Facebook or a dedicated channel, and that got us thinking: how do we capture the people who attended Mass virtually?"

Forming Criteria is Half the Battle

So many questions began to flood in as Schwob and his team began to put together some criteria to capture virtual Mass attendance: do they count total views per stream, or just those who tuned in live? Do they record just the views from that particular Sunday, or can they allow for a window of time to pass?

"It was a little chaotic because we had never done this

before," Schwob admitted. "So many parishes were offering all kinds of ways to watch Mass and receive spiritual communion each week. In the end, we just had everyone tally the number of views on a per Mass basis and send it in to our office."

His office was then tasked with deciding what constitutes a view, meaning does one view count truly just one person, or as a family unit?

"If you're tuning in to a livestream, more likely it's more than one person. So, what I did was for each parish, I took the average number of registered Catholics per household, and multiplied it by the views," he said. For example, if the average per parish was about 2.5 persons per house, and there was one view, then Schwob counted that as 2.5 people who watched the livestream.

A "Startling" Discovery

With that criteria in mind, Schwob began to receive his counts for the year, mentally preparing himself for yet another year of Mass attendance on the decline. That is, until he began to tally the numbers, and discovered that his predictions may have been a little off.

"When I finished adding all the numbers, I made a pretty big discovery," he said. "We had more people attend both virtually and physically this year, than we had last year attend just physically ... a lot more!"

In October 2019, 27% of registered Catholics attended Mass at a parish in the Archdiocese of St. Louis. In October 2020, physical Mass attendance was 13% and virtual Mass worshipers came out to 25%. Added together, 38% of registered Catholics attended Mass — a nearly 50% increase from the past year.

Schwob admits that these numbers are still a work in progress. Because livestreaming is still relatively new, we need to take views with a "grain of salt." Some parishes with high numbers of registered parishioners sent in very low viewership numbers, he explained, while some other smaller parishes sent in very high numbers. Reasons for it varied, such as perhaps some parishes offer a Mass livestreamed but don't market it as much as they should, to having other people "drop in" to Mass who weren't necessarily from that parish or even from that particular region. But for now, this is what they must work with, and he believes the numbers are as accurate as they're going to be — for now, that is.

Multiple Masses Allow for Multiple Views

Schwob did make a what he calls a rather "fascinating" discovery when it comes to views per Mass, however.

"Out of the two-thirds of parishes that offered

livestreaming in our archdiocese, about one-third livestreamed more than one Mass each weekend," he explained. "What I found interesting is that the parishes that offered multiple Masses each weekend had twice as many online views as those that only livestreamed one."

While Schwob has yet to come up with a concrete reason as to why the numbers came out this way, he did theorize that it was probably due to Mass times.

"There are some people who believe that in order for Mass to 'count' for that Sunday, they needed to watch it live," he said. "So, when Mass is only livestreamed at one particular time, as opposed to each time they celebrated it, or at least a couple times, they quite possibly could have missed out on 'catching' those views."

Whatever the case may be, Schwob, like other church leaders, believes that livestreamed Masses are here to stay. Moving forward, he's looking forward to recording more data and using it to better evangelize and engage Catholics within the Archdiocese of St. Louis and beyond. If your parish is still refining your livestreaming capabilities, or are gearing up to start, check out **"How to Create a Better Livestreaming Mass Experience."**



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