

Mathew Gwozdz

Jonathon Ebel

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Study on the Effect of Isolation on the Prayer Lives of Catholic Illini

With COVID-19 raging across the United States, many have been forced to remain indoors to prevent the spread of the virus to themselves and their loved ones. As a result, “non-essential” businesses have been closed, and gatherings of people of 10 or more have been prohibited. This has been a frustrating and difficult time for not only ordinary communities, but for religious communities as well. Many Catholic parishes have stopped offering public Liturgies, and thus the reception of the Sacraments has been all but gone. Because there exists in Catholicism a heavy Sacramental nature in one’s relationship to God (that is, one better their relationship with God by receiving the Sacraments of the Eucharist, Confession, and is initiated into the Church by Baptism and later Confirmation, to name a few), it is interesting to see how the prayer lives of Catholics have been affected. As such, I decided to investigate the effect of the isolation induced by COVID-19. I sent out an email to the Koinonia mailing list, which an email list that everyone who has been on a retreat offered by Newman at UIUC is added onto, with 6 questions pertaining to the prayer lives of each person. From that I received 12 responses, 7 students and 5 alumni. In addition I interviewed the Head Chaplain of the Newman Center, Fr. Robert Lampitt, and have observed the various online services that Newman has offered. Because all persons receiving the email have previously been on a retreat, these are people who can be said more or less that they have a basic understanding of the faith and its teachings. It can be said that those who are cultural Catholics or lack some understanding of the core teachings of

the Church are not included in this study, and therefore the effect of the isolation on their prayer lives has not been documented.

Q.1) Describe your daily (or weekly) prayer life before quarantine, whatever fits you the most. How often did you pray? How often did you attend events such as Mass and/or Adoration? Was prayer an important part of your life?

From the responses of the students, 6 of them said that they attended Mass every day and 1 of them said that they attended Mass every Sunday and every Holy Day of Obligation. The 6 that said they went to daily Mass reported that their prayer lives were very important to them and that they prayed daily, with variations from 10-15 minutes a day to the Rosary and the Liturgy of the Hours every night. The 1 that went to mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation said that their prayer was not very important to them, and that even when they prayed only during Lent, which was their Lenten sacrifice, they did not manage to make it each day.

The alumni had similar results with the students. The 1 alumnus who reported going to Mass on an infrequent basis said that their prayer life was a “struggle”. The rest of the 4 alumni said their prayer lives were important to them and that they maintained some kind of routine, be it 15 minutes a day or the “Jesus Prayer” at a certain moment. 2 of them reported going to daily Mass while the rest reported that they went to Mass more than the minimum of Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation.

Q.2) Describe your daily (or weekly) prayer life currently, whatever fits you the most. How often do you pray? Do you attend any events online such as Mass and/or Adoration? Is your prayer an important part of your life now?

All students have commented that their prayer life has adjusted since the quarantine, with 1 claiming that their routine has broken down since. Some that went to daily Mass have stated that they now only watch Sunday Mass, but have either increased the frequency of their prayer from 15 to 30 minutes, or have kept it the same. The 1 student who said that their prayer life was poor before the quarantine reported that they “are more reliant on the Lord”, and that prayer is now a more important part of their life and keeps them connected with their faith during these difficult times. All students have identified a positive experience with their prayer life currently, except the 1 who’s routine has broken down, though even they said that their prayer life is still important to them.

The alumni all reported roughly the same adjustments that the students made to their prayer lives. Some have increased the amount of times that they watch Mass from two days to the whole week, and some have decreased their Mass viewings from daily to only Sunday now. 1 alumnus reported that the quality of prayer has decreased, and that “contemplative prayer time can easily get focused on the pandemic.” All alumni reported that their prayer life is of importance to them to them, including the alumnus that went to Mass infrequently and reported their prayer life was a struggle before the quarantine. Specifically, the alumnus reported that they “don’t have to feel guilty about not going to Confession”, and that they are “not committing a sin by receiving the Eucharist because no one is receiving the Eucharist” (I assume they mean a Spiritual Communion, which is what Catholics make when they are unable to receive the

Eucharist as Mass.) The alumna also mentioned that they have even been making daily Mass and reported that they can even watch Mass at 3 AM due to them keeping their husband's overnight schedule.

Q.3) What do you think the biggest effect of quarantine has been on your prayer life?

5 out of the 7 reported that the quarantine has made their prayer life more consistent as they now follow a routine. For the 2 that reported otherwise, one wrote that the biggest effect has been the “inability to receive the body, blood, soul, and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ”, while the other wrote that “the decay of routine has had a negative impact on my prayer life.”. The others reported that the quarantine has affected their prayer lives negatively by being cut off from the Mass, and, in addition, one reported that the isolation has been difficult.

Shifting gears to the alumni, 3 of them reported that the biggest effect that quarantine has had on their prayer life is not being able to go to Mass. Specifically, 2 of the 3 reported that they miss worshipping with their fellow parishioners and the socializing experiences that the Mass provided. Concerning the other 2 alumni, 1 reported that they felt their relationship with Jesus did not change, but that their prayer routine has changed and that they are praying less than before the quarantine. The other alumna that went to Mass infrequently claimed that their prayer life has improved because it is more accessible. Expanding on that, they did not feel safe walking alone to Mass which created a barrier between them and the Liturgy, and now they are currently longing for Mass very much.

Q.4) Do you believe that your prayer life is going to return to how things were before quarantine, or will you keep any changes to your prayer life that you have adopted now?

1 of the students reported that they hope to get back to more of a routine after, while the rest all indicate a positive experience with their prayer lives. 1 student reported that they hope they will not see prayer as a “necessity”, but hope to keep the prayer life they have cultivated now in order to keep the “rekindled flame alive”. 3 more report that they would like to keep the changes to the prayer life that they have adopted now, and 2 claim that they will be in touch with the Blessed Sacrament more often. Besides the 1 who is discontent with their routine, and 1 with the loss of access to the Eucharist, all students have reported some type of positive change to their prayer life and a longing to have access to the Sacraments again.

Concerning the alumni, 1 of them reports that they hope Mass will continue to be streamed online, so that if they miss it in person then they can watch it at home. They claim that having Mass available 24/7 has been helpful to them, and that if Mass isn’t available online after the quarantine then they won’t be able to continue with these changes to their prayer lives. The other 4 alumni all report that they expect their prayer lives to go back to normal again, with 1 writing that their routine will return, 1 writing that it will take some time to go back to normal after the come back of Mass and Adoration, and 2 saying that they will keep the changes that they made to their prayer lives as they have found them fruitful. One of the alumni who is going to keep the changes they made to their prayer life (an increase of prayer) said that they believe it was stronger before the quarantine.

Q.5) Has the lack of a wider community of worship impacted your view of the Church and/or God? How do you feel about the lack of public worship events?

The responses by the students to these questions have been varied. 4 of the students reported that they felt a stronger connection to the wider Church for the reasons of seeing how beautiful the Sacraments are, how God desires a relationship with everyone despite the churches being closed, and how there is solidarity because everyone is going through the same thing. Another student reported how they don't feel a lack of community because of how many online groups they are a part of, and the rest of the 2 expressed a heavy dismay (more so than the other students in this question) of Masses no longer being offered to the public. Those who reported that a lack of access to the Sacraments upset them was mostly correlated with those whose prayer routines have broken down and/or those who have an intense longing for the Sacraments. There was a minor correlation with those who were less saddened with the closing of public worship events and those who felt that they were in solidarity with one another, as it strengthened their sense of community and the universality of the Church.

On the other hand, all alumni report missing having the wider sense of community and praying together, except for the 1 alumnus who reported that they didn't have a community to begin with before the quarantine. None of the alumni reported that their view of the Church changed as a result of the lack of public Mass. Another alumnus wrote that this time apart "helped me to see the spiritual community, the Mystical Body of Christ", while another wrote that this separation has been the cause of spiritual desolation. The general consensus is that they all miss the wider community (except for the 1), and their view of the Church has not changed.

Q.6) What has been the biggest challenge in maintaining your prayer life?

Among students, they report that the biggest challenges in maintaining their prayer lives have been being consistent, a lack routine, distractions, being separated from friends, loud families, and the ease of laziness.

The alumni report similar challenges to the students, such as the lack of community, difficulty of time adjustment, lack of confession, and moving everything online.

Final Thoughts and Interview Comparison

Looking over the results, one of the most interesting pieces has been the correlation of the responses between Questions 3 and 5. Those who reported that they feel a sense of community and solidarity despite Masses being gone have also reported their prayer life has improved and has become more consistent (in the link to the data, it's **S1, S2, S4, S5, S7**), whereas those who did not make mention of community or that the loss of community was a hard hit reported having a struggling routine of prayer (**S6, A1, A4, A5**). This matches with what Fr. Lampitt said in the interview about a lack of community having a negative effect on one's prayer life.

S1 and **A2** are interesting cases because both reported that their prayer lives actually improved during the quarantine, despite both saying that prayer was not very important to them beforehand (especially for **A2**, who went to Mass infrequently). In **S1**'s case, they reported that having family and friends who watched Mass and then texting each other afterwards helped them to keep a sense of community. **A2**, on the other hand, reported that they had no community whatsoever before the quarantine hit, and that a sense of guilt prevented them from going to

Mass because they missed the previous one, in a sort of cycle. What helped them to improve their prayer life was the increased accessibility of the Mass. **S1** and **A2** contradict Fr. Lampitt's opinion that those who don't pray much have fallen away from their prayer lives. To account for this, I believe it is because these times are so uncertain that people turn to what they know and what is stable. In addition, if they manage to find a community behind what they do, it becomes a positive feedback loop and their prayer life improves. Those who also had guilt of missing Mass are now no longer blocked from attending as they can do so freely online. What is also contradicted is that those who are praying have "figured it out". The lack of communal support negatively affects even those who had a solid prayer life before the quarantine hit.

A common theme that nearly all respondents reported was the negative effect of not being able to access the Sacraments, which coincides with Fr. Lampitt's claims. Those whose prayer lives placed such an important role on the Sacraments are the ones most negatively affected by not being to receive them.

What also is in line with Fr.'s claims is that the lack of a routine negatively affects one's prayer life. Those who reported having a struggle with their routine, scheduling their prayer, reported having a negatively affected prayer life.

What is also interesting is that the alumni, overall, reported that their prayer lives have been more negatively affected than the students'. I conjecture that this is because students have made friends at the Newman center, which is the nucleus of all things Catholic on campus, and have found it easier to retain a sense of community. Alumni, on the other hand, are scattered and would be less in touch with their friends from university as they would have had to move on with their lives.

Overall, the two biggest factors affecting prayer life have been community and routine. The lack of access to the Sacraments has definitely been a huge blow to the Catholic Illini, but for those who have been able to foster a sense of community and keep a routine of prayer, they have been able to keep their personal prayer lives before quarantine consistent or improved upon.

DATA: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1THsjL0oOk-93KPMJLOL9eKrTaa9teYZHaBmUIZvj76I/edit?usp=sharing>

<https://clyp.it/3fxjdvlf?token=600e8e548471246b43dddf134b4940c7>