

Part I

Following his Disaster Emergency declaration on March 6 due to the coronavirus disease pandemic, Governor Wolf, on March 16, ordered a shutdown of all nonessential businesses statewide in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. The governor also urged people to stay at home and issued guidelines for public gatherings, including worship. Religious leaders were encouraged to “exercise discretion to mitigate the spread of illness.” To comply with the governor’s declaration, all statewide Catholic bishops dispensed the obligation to attend Sunday Mass on March 12. Governor Wolf issued a stay-at-home order on March 23 for seven counties, including Chester. This order was extended statewide on April 1.

In solidarity with the other Pennsylvania bishops, Archbishop Perez announced on March 17 the suspension of all public Masses in the Archdiocese, for over 200 churches and over 1 million Catholics, beginning March 18. For the first time in the commonwealth’s history, all houses of worship were closed to public worship. As one ABVM parishioner observed, “Before this [COVID-19], churches stayed open even during the plague!”

ABVM was immediately impacted: public celebration of Mass, access to the sacraments, visitation of the sick, ABVM School classes and CYFF classes, CYO activities as well as the work of ministries and parish organizations stopped. Over the next weeks, Father Scott— together with the parish and school staff, the parish ministries, and the Parish and Finance Councils—assessed and responded to the situation.

During this unprecedented shutdown, it was more critical than ever to find ways of keeping the parish connected. Since public worship was curtailed and classes suspended, alternative ways of communication were essential, given the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic. As reported in the media, projections of the pandemic’s impact and the extent and duration of the shutdown changed almost weekly. Government’s response was also evolving as new health measures and restrictions were announced.

On March 28, the parish website announced that confessions would resume with the additional precautions required to minimize spread of the virus.

On April 2, Father Scott posted a letter to parishioners on the parish website. He wrote: “Dear Parishioners, the image of Pope Francis sitting alone...in a normally bustling St. Peter’s Square...symbolizes the reality for all the churches. They are empty. Unfortunately, out of love and concern for one another, we cannot gather together for public worship until the pandemic passes.” While this first post acknowledged the situation that required the shutdown, a steady stream of website posts full of hopeful messages followed in the weeks after: a Palm Sunday blessing and an invitation for a drive-through pickup of blessed palms; links to livestreamed Mass from the Basilica; confession times for Good Friday; a series of reflections by Father Scott; blessing of the Easter food on Holy Saturday; and, on April 14, the first ABVM livestream—the Chaplet of Divine Mercy and Exposition and Benediction.

On April 3, despite the pandemic, 52 donors responded to the blood drive sponsored by the Knights of Columbus.

On April 28, the Knights reached out to the community to offer assistance to families impacted by Covid-19.

The Reopening... the Parish Response

On April 22, Governor Wolf announced his 3-phase (Red-Yellow-Green) approach to reopening the commonwealth. Having met state criteria, on June 5, the Southeast section of the state, which included the five counties of the Archdiocese, was scheduled to move to the Yellow Phase. This phase lifted the stay-at-home order and allowed for celebration of public Masses as long as appropriate sanitation and physical distancing practices were employed, and the number of worshippers inside the church building was limited.

Prior to resuming the public celebration of Mass at ABVM, the Liturgy Committee met remotely via Zoom to decide how to implement the guidelines in our church building. This committee

included musicians, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, ushers, greeters, sacristans, Father Scott, and permanent deacons Tom Hannan and Ron Lewis. One significant challenge was developing procedures for each ministry without being able to evaluate or practice the procedure in the church building with other ministers or with a congregation.

Although reopening the church for Mass with parishioners in actual attendance was the first priority, there was a strong interest in implementing livestreaming of Mass to maintain a connection with the parishioners who could not attend in person because of Red Phase restrictions. Working with a local TV/digital communications business, parish members selected a suitable camera and hardware that was then installed in time to broadcast the first livestream Mass on Ascension Thursday, May 21. The Mass was broadcast using Facebook Live and was viewed by parishioners on the parish's Facebook page. This broadcast was followed by regular broadcasts of Sunday 10 a.m. Masses before and after the reopening.

On Saturday, June 6, the church opened its doors for the public celebration of Mass. Father Scott posted this message on the parish website: "We at Assumption BVM Parish look forward to welcoming you back! Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus as we make our way back to the in-person celebration of Mass." The first celebration of public Mass in several months was a major step on the parish's path to recovery.