

“Enlarge the Space of Your Tent”

Livestreaming as Evangelization

“There’s my church!” she would cry when her son would drive into the parking lot at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Madison. She was actually not a member of the parish, nor was she even from Madison, but she had been coming periodically to Mass when she was able and so recognized the building. I say periodically, because she moved to town to enter hospice, and was not always able to attend Mass in person. But she and her visiting family still attended Mass with the St. Thomas Aquinas parish family through the parish’s innovative livestreaming capabilities, which indeed helps us enlarge the space of our tent as part of our evangelization effort not just for our parish church, but for our wider Catholic Church.

Rooted in Challenge

The staff at the St. Thomas Aquinas parish was preparing for renovation of the church when the pandemic struck in 2020. Recognizing the need to be proactive in a challenging atmosphere, St. Thomas directed additional funds to livestreaming capabilities on Facebook and YouTube. Instead of one single camera fixed statically on the altar, St. Thomas employs multiple, movable cameras that can focus on the ambo, the choir, or other locations in which action is taking place. In addition, St. Thomas created a ‘control center’ where trained volunteers operate the cameras, cutting between views and creating a more dynamic and immersive atmosphere for those viewing the livestream, making participants feel more as if they are one of the worshipping community.

Expanded Boundaries

This adaptability greatly expands the possibilities for implementation. Liturgically, St. Thomas has been able to livestream baptisms, funerals, weddings and other functions, such as Stations of the Cross. In addition, the parish has installed a large retractable screen in the sanctuary, on which such things as the prayers for the Stations can be displayed for those viewing remotely. In conjunction with this, the Facebook feature has a comment section through which to send and receive messages from the control room volunteer and other remote viewers, creating a more interactive experience – not just for the remote viewer, but the live-streamer as well. As one of our volunteer live-streamers noted, “I grew up Methodist, and in the Methodist church they have acolytes who enter with the pastor with a candle lighter. They light the candles and then act as altar assistants. After the service, they relight their lighters before extinguishing the candles and then recess with the pastor, taking the flame, symbolizing taking the Light of Christ into the world. I feel honored and privileged to take the Light of Christ into the world with streaming. There are people who comment on Facebook during the Mass, and even though I am alone in the room, I always feel like they are sitting with me during the service.”

Building Community, Reaching Out

Keeping our remote viewers as integrated in our community as we can is one of our goals at St. Thomas. In light of this, we create a monthly pictorial montage of events of that month: weddings, funerals, baptisms and special events. Playing before each Mass of the second Sunday of the month on the large

screen and livestreamed to our remote family members, this outreach connects us together as a worshipping community. In addition, others who may not be members can be introduced to our family. In several local care centers, residents gather at a convenient time to watch our recorded livestreamed Mass, enabling them to worship as part of a parish community.

Screen Evangelization

Hitherto, I have spoken mostly of reaching our remote parishioners, but the scope of our efforts is much broader. As I mentioned, besides regular Masses we have livestreamed weddings, funerals, baptisms and other events all around the globe to family members and friends of those involved, many who are Catholic but some of whom may be lapsed Catholics, members of other faiths, or completely unchurched. This provides an avenue for reaching out, even in an indirect way, to evangelize. Last autumn at our celebration of Our Lady of Chiquinquirá, children prepared a special song to Mary. Many of these children are refugees from Venezuela who fled the country with their parents, leaving behind grandparents and other relatives. At that Mass, the grandparents in Venezuela and Mexico were able to see their grandchildren at Mass honoring the Blessed Virgin Mary.

These livestreams have a tremendous impact. One livestreamed funeral had over 1000 views, generating notes and letter of thanks from viewers who were grateful to be included though unable to attend in person. This, in turn, enables us to reach out and accompany them during a difficult time.

Aside from such liturgical functions, we have also installed livestreaming capability in our social hall, to provide a means of streaming non-liturgical events, such as special presentations and catechetical programs.

Not A Substitute

As exciting and boundless as livestreaming seems, it is definitely not a substitute for actually being present in community for worship or other activities, most especially Holy Mass and the reception of the Eucharist. However, for those who cannot attend, for whatever sound reason, livestreaming provides a lifeline to the life-giving Church community. An older parishioner who lives nearby and walks to Church and sometimes struggles with winter weather and snowy sidewalks says, "I love Fr. Bart and enjoy being able to celebrate Mass with him without worrying about the weather and leaving my house."

As an evangelizing Church, we must make use of all the tools available to us to bring the Good News to both members of our parishes and to the wider community. Embracing technology such as livestreaming as an evangelizing opportunity is essential as the Church moves into the future.