

As parishes reopen, mental and spiritual health care need attention

HOUSTON (CNS) – When parishioners begin returning to their churches as pandemic restrictions are gradually lifted, the buildings will look the same, but the environment might feel different because of new social-distancing measures.

For example, in Houston, a young adult woman who went to Sunday Mass the first weekend in May when her parish reopened for public Mass, said her initial excitement changed to anxiety and fear as she noticed others not following the parish's new guidelines for Mass attendance.

Her mind raced with distraction during the Mass even as she focused on the liturgy.

For her, despite the wearing of a mask and following every guideline, the uneasiness and concern may have been too much. Back home, she realized she was not sure if she would go back again the next weekend, especially after considering that the Galveston-Houston Archdiocese has still dispensed the obligation to attend Sunday Mass.

"I really appreciated the measures the parish has taken to distance and sanitize, but the anxiety ... it was difficult to deal with," she said. "I may try daily Mass."

As churches reopen, favorite pews might now be blocked off, friendly faces might seem distant or unrecognizable behind masks, or those who remain at home might feel jealous of those who can attend Mass.

These experiences are "absolutely" normal, real and valid, according to Anabel Lucio Morales, a licensed community

counselor at the Counseling and Behavioral Health Clinic at Catholic Charities in Galveston-Houston.

While she admitted other generations also have endured crises, this experience is “much more troubling” due to the constant news about it, which can increase anxiety.

“But we should not be governed by fear,” she said. “We should use wisdom in making the best decisions for ourselves and family, and trust that God has not forsaken his people. We face a real danger, and we must adjust how we live life. But we should not live in fear but rather in the peace that God gives us.”

Parishioners need to remember these new measures are there for the health and best interest of everyone, she said.

“We are mind, body and soul” with the physical, emotional and spiritual sides that are all interconnected, she said. How we think is going to impact how we feel, she said. Negative or anxious thoughts will drive an anxious or nervous emotion.

As parishioners return to Mass, “we have a choice on how we are going to think about” new changes, Morales told the Texas Catholic Herald, Galveston-Houston’s archdiocesan newspaper.

“When you get very strict or very rigid in your mentality, then that’s going to set you up for being let down when things change,” she said.

If the focus remains only on all the changes of how Mass will look, this will drive an anxious emotion or possibly a resentful emotion, she said, depending on how one views the measures advised by local officials.

While a more positive view of such changes may bring a different emotion, it might not make everyone happy. Still, it can “bring a little bit more ease and understanding to a changing situation,” Morales added.

She also stressed there are “blessings that we can glean from this experience” and encouraged parishioners now to focus on what is right and not what is wrong, which she said can be applied to any part of life: marriages, families, work and spiritual practices.

“If we only walk in thinking of all the things that we can’t do the same way, then we’re going to miss out on all the beautiful rituals that we still have the ability to practice,” she said. “It’s so important that our focus stays on the unchanging word of God, on his love, on the things that we still have so that we can stay connected with the body of Christ even if it means that it looks a little different.”

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Find more resources, like videos about coping during the pandemic, are available online at <https://catholiccharities.org/our-services/strengthening-families/counseling>.