

A reminder of what matters from bricks and mortar



A year ago, when Masses resumed in my diocese after being closed due to the pandemic, I never wanted to be unable to attend Mass in the church building ever again. The feeling of exile, of not being able to pray and worship in the building that had housed so many hours of personal conversion, had been real. And coming home felt so good.

Then, about a month ago, my parish family was forced to vacate our church building and celebrate Mass in our school gym. The reason was not COVID-19. This time it was structural damage. The exterior brick wall at the back of the church was visibly bowing out, and the note from the architect wasn't clear as to whether or not it was a serious hazard for people to be in the building. So, in an abundance of caution, we moved Sunday Masses to the school gym and weekday Masses to our chapel next door.

But even though we were still able to have Mass – for which I am so grateful – there was a sense of fear and foreboding. Would we be able to return to our church building soon, or would we have to go another unknown number of months before stepping foot inside the building once more?

After a couple of weeks, our pastor announced that construction was beginning on the exterior wall in order to tear down the bricks that were the main hazard. But, we would not be able to get new bricks in the color we needed until October due to a high demand for materials. Even harder to hear was the fact that labor would not be available until spring. If the architect and insurance deemed the building still a hazard even once the outer layer was removed, there

was the possibility that we might not be able to return to our church until Easter of next year.

The thought of Advent, Christmas and Lent not spent in our church was a heartbreaking concept. Imagining weddings and baptisms being held in the gym for the foreseeable future was hard to accept as well. It felt as if we had just gotten back and were able to worship as “normal” once again when this new issue struck. As my pastor noted in his homily one weekend, we had been “exiled” to the gym.

I’ll be honest and admit I was tempted to visit a different parish on that first Sunday in the gym. My heart was heavy, and the idea of finding another parish in which to worship – complete with beautiful statues and stained glass windows instead of bleachers and a raised basketball hoop – seemed like a good solution.

Luckily, I love my parish too much and decided not to jump ship right away. And I’m glad I didn’t.

During his homily that first weekend, my pastor encouraged us to reach out to any parishioners who had talked about going to Mass somewhere else during the interim of this project. “Tell them Father Andrew is not happy with them,” he joked, “and that he wants them back at St. John’s.”

Because this is our parish, and it’s more than a building. Yes, the building matters. It is a place that encourages reverence and lifts our spirits up to God. It is a place that draws us out of ourselves and reminds us that there is more than this world. It is a place where our community is knit together in a unique way.

But it’s during times like these where the community shines, where the generosity of its people is evident, where our love for the parish is attractive and helps us live our mission in a new and renewed light.

Luckily, we were cleared to return to Mass the first weekend in August. We still have to wait a few months for the materials and even longer for labor, but we are back.

Despite the inconvenience, it was a needed reminder of how quickly we take things for granted – our churches, communities, even the sacraments. After everything we went through last year, I wish I didn't need the reminder, but I'm glad to have it just the same.

Ava Lalor is assistant editor for Our Sunday Visitor and editor for Radiant magazine.