



SERVING the hungry

CATHEDRAL YOUNG ADULTS ENGAGE ONLINE PLATFORMS TO FEED PANDEMIC-INDUCED HUNGER

BY LYNETTE MAGNINO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE GERMAN

Young adult ministry members from the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament have long delivered hot meals on Tuesday nights to Sacramento's hungry homeless. Pulling a wagon through downtown streets, they stave off hunger pangs reverberating in the bellies of residents of the city's heart, bonding in their shared mission to serve.

YOUR STORIES OUR STORY

“Our main focus is to feed the homeless,” confirms Victoria Ramos, 25, although openly unsettled by another kind of hunger revealed, if not induced, by the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We saw need and hunger among parishioners,” Victoria says from her frontline vantage point as parish secretary and as an active member of the Cathedral young adults group. Her voice is laden

with concern as she tells of the spiritual struggles the faithful endured amid the state's stay-at-home orders – months of on-again, off-again, indoor, outdoor uncertainty. She and fellow group members sensed it. The emptiness was palpable.

“People were yearning for Christ, yearning for sacraments,” says Ruben Arocan, 34, cantor and long-time altar server/master of ceremonies for Cathedral liturgies.

Recalling the earliest months of the pandemic “when it seemed like the world was coming to an end,” Ruben describes an “organic” digital response to the obvious spiritual

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hunger permeating throughout the parish community.

“In the beginning, it was just kind of like, OK, we have this idea and we’ll see how it goes,” Ruben says candidly, admitting the pandemic necessitated an all-out effort to help parishioners “actively participate even though they’re not physically present.” Victoria described the immediate call-to-action as “baptism by fire” to quickly satisfy the spiritually hungry with content-rich online platforms.

To “serve the hungry” now had clear dual meaning as group members rose to new levels of leadership, expanding their routine ministry of Tuesday night food wagon rounds to the *homeless* to include daily digital offerings to the *hopeless* – those wandering in a spiritual desert brought on by COVID-19.

SPIRITUAL LIFELINES

Titi Kila, young adult ministry coordinator for the past nine years, lends insight to the evolution of the Cathedral’s digital footprint.

“We were already on social media,” she explains, listing all the platforms and applications – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube – along with websites. “It wasn’t fed daily, like it’s being fed now,” she concedes. Titi equates the former approach as more of a “hobby,” with content added periodically but not routinely or with as much intention. “It became a daily thing,” she

says, emphasizing how the pandemic fast-tracked their skills. They soon recognized these platforms were essential spiritual lifelines.

All around the world, parishes scrambled to implement livestreamed Masses as the only safe alternative to having people in the pews. Fortunately, Titi had waded the livestream waters years before with nothing but her iPhone.

“I had no idea what I was doing, no background at all,” she acknowledges, just sheer desire to share the Cathedral’s celebration of the Mass and the voices in the choir. Yet, those humble beginnings evolved and by the time the pandemic hit, Titi and the “Stream Team,” comprised of young adult members Victoria, Alex Visitacion, Joseph Visitacion, Victor Amador, Julian Rosario and Ruben, were quite adept with the livestream video equipment and software.

Today, operating a mini studio in the choir loft, she remembers an unusual sense of urgency to invest in and master new equipment back in 2019. In hindsight, she believes the Holy Spirit nudged their progress, allowing a relatively seamless move to livestreamed daily Masses and various other live and recorded events including concerts and rosary hours.

Titi and the Stream Team imagine integrating the livestreaming options and social media carefully,

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- TITI KILA



■ From left, Victor Amador (with Victoria Ramos on iPad), Joseph Visitacion, Father Michael O’Reilly, Titi Kila and Ruben Arocan at the doors of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament.



■ Joseph Visitacion, Titi Kila and Alex Visitacion work the control center.

encouraging complementary use and physical presence as safety permits. “It’s weighing heavily on my mind,” she acknowledges, unsure of what “it” may look like but confident a new era will see Catholics engaged digitally and in person, more fully and consciously participating across the spectrum of their lives.

“We saw need and hunger among parishioners.”

- VICTORIA RAMOS

“We can reach more people this way,” she stresses with confidence and wonderment as she watches young adult members push out a variety of spiritual lifelines. Their creative efforts are met with instant feedback, grateful emails, positive comments and words of encouragement.

She offers the new daily feature, “A Moment of Prayer with Father Michael O’Reilly” as an example. She posts the pastor’s brief video prayer at 5 a.m. “If I’m late, and it’s 5:01 a.m., my phone is buzzing with text messages asking, ‘Did you oversleep?’ or ‘Where’s the moment of prayer?’” she laughs



■ Julian Rosario operates the camera while Joseph Visitacion checks the shot.

genuinely pleased that people long to be spiritually fed in this way as they start their days.

The parish podcast, “Let’s Talk Parish,” presents casual discussion with Cathedral staff members or parishioners to foster community. Notices are pushed out to subscribers, which now number nearly 400, although anyone can access the bi-weekly episodes on the website or podcast apps. The young adults’ ministry also produces a tailored podcast directed toward the real life matters of young adults in English, Spanish and Chinese, to reach the full scope of their demographic.

The group also manages the “Walk With Us” blog, taking turns writing spiritual reflections every week. Titi sees the blog as an opportunity for spiritual expression, beckoning once-timid contributors to share from their hearts, writing words that nourish others.

The semi-annual NightFever fellowship event ventured online, too, although Titi was skeptical whether it could be successful. To her surprise more than 3,000 viewers participated including international viewers.

“That’s what this pandemic has been doing,” Titi says, indicating that talents and leadership skills have surfaced exactly when needed. “For some reason, we’ve been able to extend our ministry,” she adds marveling at the growth and interest among young adults who just know what to do and how to do it despite the pandemic.

Both Victoria and Ruben transition “upstairs” to the choir loft’s Stream Team work when not engaged in blogging or serving other liturgical needs. Victoria assists with various tasks such as live audio mixing and directing the video feed. Ruben prepares digital narratives and bulletin news while also monitoring the video feed to facilitate a meaningful online worship experience.

Just one year ago, the Cathedral young adults group had less than 10 regular and consistent members. In the past year, nearly 30 young adults have found a voice and a calling to help the Cathedral parish feed both bodily and spiritual hunger. The diverse, family-friendly, multi-talented cohort connects young, service-minded individuals between the ages of 21 and 40. They are invigorated by their outreach but more so by the chance to deliver food and hope, nourishing souls. †



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About the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament at www.cathedralsacramento.org.

About “A Moment of Prayer,” at <https://www.youtube.com/c/CathedraloftheBlessedSacrament>

About “Let’s Talk Parish” at <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/lets-talk-parish/id1542824170>

About “Walk with Us” blog at <https://cathedralyoungadults.wordpress.com/blog-posts/>