

## **How religious leaders are keeping faith during coronavirus, even from social distance**

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**REV. THOMAS CONWAY, *Executive Director, [St. Anthony Shrine](#), Boston***

"I got a call yesterday from a woman saying, “I’m sitting outside the [church] building,” and she was crying. Her brother was in ICU, and because of the coronavirus crisis, she wasn’t able to go visit him. And he was dying. She had a very reasonable request: “Can we just pray for him for a minute?” And I said, “Sure, we can do that.” So we stood outside, and we prayed on the sidewalk for him.

We have a number of high-risk, vulnerable populations that interact with each other. And when we saw that this was a dangerous situation for them, in terms of their own health and safety and public health risks, that was the basis for our decision [on Thursday, March 12] to close. So we did [a Facebook Live Mass](#) [earlier today, Sunday March 15] in English and in Spanish. Around 350 people went on for those Masses, and we got a lot of comments. The other nice thing is that people can play it over again; they can go and look at it right now if they want to.

But it’s a problem that folks are cut off from services now. One aspect is spiritual—people come together and lean on each other for spiritual strength. Secondly, groups like 12-step groups that need the shrine are not able to meet. We’re looking at other ways that we might be of support to the community—but there’s something about getting together and being together. There’s no substitute for that. Things like distribution of Communion, confession, and anointing of the sick, you can’t do unless you’re in person. This whole crisis has made me reflect on how important proximity is to the Catholic’s life.

Lent is a call to sacrifice for Christians and Catholics. This isn’t what any of us were expecting, but we’re handed this task right now.

This situation will end at some point. Everything will look different, but we’ll still be church. God will still be with us, Jesus will be our savior, and we’ll be able to come together and be grateful to God that we made it through. And whenever that comes, that’s our Easter."

**SHAYKH YASIR FAHMY, *Islamic community leader***

"The other night around 10 p.m. I was in a supermarket and saw a woman who must have been in her 80s moving so gingerly. But everything at her level of reach was taken. I thought, *All these people of means and energy and health rushed in and took everything*. There is so much of what we are that is beautiful and so much that is not so beautiful. There are so many correctives I hope and pray come out of this.

In Islam, doing things in a congregational fashion is far more praiseworthy than doing it individually. The quality of being in close company in spaces of togetherness is sacred. It's the notion of *Suhba* in our tradition, and it's deeply impactful. So this situation certainly shocks the system. At Harvard, we had our first class over Zoom video conferencing last week and I was looking at a bunch of faces on the laptop and they were just overwhelmed. One mentioned how social isolation is really detrimental to her mental health. People, for the most part, suffer when they live in their heads.

But there is also an opportunity in having to be isolated. I was just on a livestream in front of 2,000 community members talking about how we actually nourish ourselves in all this, and how do we view this virus for what it is, which is nothing but a creation of God? It is a sign that should make us reflect and contemplate our lives: Why do we live and what is our destiny and how should I spend my days and think about my creator?"

**RABBI KEITH STERN, *Temple Beth Avodah, Newton***

I'm an extrovert and get my energy when I engage with others. Just as I'm reaching a stage in my recovery [from my February 25 heart bypass surgery] where I can look forward to reconnecting with people, it's just taboo. I feel a tremendous amount of sadness about this sense of separation, particularly as I've rounded this really scary corner and don't get the opportunity to rejoice about it with anyone other than my immediate family.

Judaism is not a slow act. It is all about the minyans, the other people you study with, and the sense of gathering, or *kehillah*. It's about seeing people and connecting, laughing, celebrating, about a kind of spiritual connecting that is so strong, even if you are walking into a sanctuary for the first time for a wedding or bar mitzvah that's not yours. You understand that this is a place for our people to be. There is a Torah portion in which God says to Moses, "And let them make me a sanctuary so I can dwell among them." Even God needs that. I love that.

So now what? We've jumped into the technology and thank God it exists and we'll explore it. We're all trying so hard to make these technical modalities work, to understand this sense of community in a virtual sense. But there's nothing like the real thing. We are making do.

It's a deeply painful irony that the central operating phrase of Temple Beth Avodah is essentially: "Come in, the doors are always open and the lights are always on." It is deeply wounding that we can't do that for each other. I understand that it is federally mandated and the right thing to do. But I can't help but have a deep sense of failure. Not only do we not know how to put the puzzle pieces together but we are fashioning the pieces