

Qatar churches in the time of the coronavirus pandemic

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Not long ago, it was hard to imagine a church service without people huddled together in pews, singing, dancing, praying, or reverently listening to sermons. Due to the lockdown imposed as a measure to decrease the spread of COVID-19 in Qatar, church services have been reduced to pre-recorded or live streaming sessions.

Qatar went officially under lockdown on March 21. Since then, the government of Qatar closed down a majority of institutions including parks, malls, schools, and churches. These events quickly led to an economic downturn, which has also affected religious institutions.

The spread of COVID-19 escalated at an unlikely time, when churches worldwide were preparing to celebrate Good Friday and Easter Sunday, the two most important events in the Christian calendar. The abruptness of the pandemic has not given churches time to find new ways to collect tithes. Some churches have chosen to stop collecting tithes and are now depending on previous collections to pay their expenses.

“We used to collect between 25,000 to 30,000 riyals every week, but now nothing,” said Father Jebaraj Devasagayam, assistant parish priest of the Church of Epiphany.

The precise amount of money churches collect from tithes has been hard to determine as most churches such as Our Lady of the Rosary and Doha Fellowship have not been forthcoming and have chosen to keep church finances private. Despite their unwillingness to publicize the churches’ finances, church leaders from the Doha Fellowship still report that funds have only slightly lowered and contributions remain consistent.

“Part of the Christian faith is that, with tithing, people either get it or they don’t and when you’re in that practice of tithing and you get it, you do it,” said David Albanese, one of the church leaders of Doha Fellowship. “And because people were able and given access so that they can come and give their tithes, many, many people have. Our giving is not what it has been but it’s still coming in,” Albanese said.

Though some churches are facing a scarcity in resources, this has not stopped them from taking care of those who lean on their contributions. For instance, Our Lady of the Rosary has continued to lend its existing resources to its charity, Poor of St. Anthony, to tide over people who work in the industrial area.

The church of the Doha Fellowship has also continued to support the churches that it has partnered with in India, Pakistan, and Greece.

“The people that we give money to, we’re still able to completely support them, pay all of our bills, pay all of the people that work for us. So God has been good during this time,” said Albanese.

Beyond financial concerns, these unprecedented circumstances also put pressure on the church to find alternatives to their usual church processions and sacred services.

“Though we followed government regulations, we are aware that our people are longing for the church,” said Father Rally Gonzaga, who is the head priest of Our Lady of the Rosary Catholic Church, situated in the Religious Complex. “We are trying to communicate with our congregation using online platforms, but it is nothing compared to what we used to do when the church was still open,” he said.

After the transition to online services, churches such as Our Lady of the Rosary, with a congregation of nearly 200,000 people, have been able to keep a marginal following. The church's YouTube live Easter service received more than 6,000 views.

Similarly, the Church of the Epiphany has also adopted online church services, on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Zoom, as well as WhatsApp chats to promote more personal communication. Its efforts have helped it maintain its average weekly following.

“Usually attendance will be more than 200, but at the moment we are getting an average of 200 people,” said Father Devasagayam.

Though the transition to online platforms has been fairly easy, creating professional video content seems to be the real struggle. Most videos uploaded on the churches' social media accounts bear the tell-tale signs of amateur filming: distorted sound, blurred images, poor lighting, and canted angles.

This has discouraged some Christians from consistently following their churches' services. “We have been receiving a couple of negative feedback regarding the quality of our content, but it is because we lack professional facilities,” said Father Devasagayam.

Despite the churches' effort to find ways to offer the solace and comfort needed by their congregations, their online presence has not been enough for some of their members. There are those who still feel that the experience of connecting with their church through online means is not as agreeable as physically attending the church.

“The Easter celebrations this year have been a challenge though we have managed to maneuver through... It's usually very important when we come together and celebrate Jesus' resurrection as Christian believers. This year has been a great challenge though we hope God

Almighty will protect us all during this period,” said Rosa Meo, who is a member of the Doha Fellowship church.

Many devout Christians attend church not only because it allows them to practice their faith but also because there is comfort to be had from engaging in the rituals that church life brings. For many church-goers, attending mass services, greeting fellow church members and gathering together in the praise of God are routines that they miss performing.

“I think you can’t really recreate the atmosphere of being able to physically be in a church in fellowship with fellow believers and so it’s quite saddening in that aspect and I miss the community,” said Darrell Pinonto, who is part of a non-denominational Christian church in Doha.

However, there are also people who have a favorable opinion regarding the church’s transition to online platforms.

“My children go to different churches because they live in different locations in America. So I ended up watching four different church services on Easter with my family because we were able to do it online... So I watched more Easter church this weekend than I have ever done,” said Albanese.

Likewise, priests continue to encourage people to see the best in their current situation and give a message of hope during this perilous time. Though the church can’t be there in its physical presence, it’s always present and ready to provide hope to those who need it most.

“This is the time that we could pray, that we could reflect on our life. The situation is not very good but this can also be something good that could come out of this particular,” said Father Gonzaga.