

St. Rita pastor steadfast in refusal to offer public Masses

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While the pastors of Marin County's 18 Catholic churches are cautiously welcoming parishioners back to communal Mass in outdoor settings, one among them says it's too early. "I'm very much opposed to opening the churches," Father Ken Weare, St. Rita's longtime pastor told Catholic San Francisco July 9. "Also restaurants and bars and vineyards and everything else, but in terms of churches, yes I'm very much opposed because it cannot be done safely."

Father Weare said news headlines in local papers over the last eight to 10 days have all said a different version of the same thing: The virus is here in Marin, it's not going away, and it's spiking.

Just because churches are allowed to open doesn't mean it's safe to, said Father Weare, a moral theologian and adjunct professor of social ethics at the University of San Francisco.

"You can put on a mask, you can bring your chair, you can sit two meters from everyone else but that is not a guarantee it is safe," he said. "You're giving people false hope, a false sense of security."

Not long after the county eased restrictions on public gatherings on June 5 to allow for outdoor liturgies, Father Weare sounded an alarm in an email to his fellow priests.

He quoted Dr. Matthew Willis, Marin County's public health officer, as saying the county's new COVID-19 cases are four times the level recommended by the state for reopening of churches.

Father Weare said St. Rita's significant population of people over the age of 60 is of particular concern to him. His oldest parishioner is 102 and was still serving as a lector when the pandemic hit.

He said he has had no complaints from parishioners about his decision.

The parish remains active despite the suspension of public Masses.

On the last weekend in June, the St. Vincent de Paul conference of the parish hosted a drive-through food drive. Parish families handed 170 bags of groceries and household goods out their car windows to be distributed to local families in need of help.

Cash donations totaling more than \$5,000 were collected.

"Closing churches has forced us to find God in places that are more difficult and complicated than the quiet of a church," Father Weare said.