



## THE PARISH OF SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA & TRUMBULL, CONNECTICUT

***Are you considering returning to Mass, but have questions or concerns?  
Check out our St. Catherine's parishioners reflecting on  
why they've returned, and what they found when they did.***

### **What's the one thing you really love about St. Catherine's?**

**Tom Matthews:** I love the sense of community that's been cultivated at St. Catherine's over the years. Different leaders have influenced that. Now that's Father Marcello. It's the community what really draws us back again and again and makes us feel so good when we come through those doors each week.

**Moira Matthews:** St. Catherine's feels like a home.

**Gabriella Ferri:** We've made a lot of great friendships and relationships by being parishioners here.

**Weston Ulbrich:** The community has been really helpful, especially now. It gives us hope in our spiritual life, meeting new people and staying sound spiritually together.

### **What was it like for you to return to Mass for the first time?**

**Tom:** It was awkward and unsettling to wear the mask, but it was certainly great to be back in church. There was a palpable sense of tension, as



*Fall Kickoff, September 2020*

people weren't quite sure how to interact with one another. While happy to be here, we were all still trying to figure out how to speak with one another and look at one another and things like that.

**Moira:** I was afraid to do the wrong thing, to sit too close. But I was so incredibly grateful to be back. And I wasn't afraid at all.

**Ann Gallo:** We had been in "practice mode" because we had been out with regular chores. When church reopened, I knew exactly what to expect and that there was more protection going on here than in the outside world. We had all been told about the safety features that were in place, and I followed every detail that I possibly could. I'm one of the older folks, so I represented that fearful group, but I missed Mass so terribly. I didn't want to do anything rash, but the way it was presented made me feel very comfortable. When I came through the door and I saw the blessed greeters there and I saw the sanctuary for the first time in a long time, I was heartwarmed. And I was not afraid.



*The Solemnity of The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, Corpus Christi 2021*

**Skip Gallo:** We knew ahead of time the protocols that were in place. We're reminded of them every time we come to Mass. Nothing is 100%, but we felt that every precaution was being taken. We had been away from Mass long enough; we were really anxious to get back. When we hit the door, there were familiar faces there, whom we hadn't seen in a number of months. At the time, seating was limited in the church, and it was all pre-registered ahead of time. All of that just made us feel more comfortable that we're in a very safe environment.

**Gabriella:** By the time church reopened, we had started going out a bit more, so our comfort level was there. Plus, being a part of the reopening team, I knew all of the precautions the church was taking, so I felt completely safe here.

**Weston:** I felt safe too. Father Marcello would always mention that we were going through a pandemic, and things – like receiving the Eucharist – will be different, but we're going to do things safely. So I did feel comfortable.

**What did the Parish do to make you more comfortable?**

**Moira:** Everything was highly organized for sure. But really what

makes me feel comfortable is God is here. The protocols were wonderful, but that was really quite secondary to me. I know the Parish was required to follow the rules. If they had done less, I wouldn't have been afraid. I still would have come.

**Ann:** You know when they speak at the podium about what's being done between the masses: the wipe down, the freshening, we don't have hymnals, we don't touch papers except our own. Those are all so important because we don't sense that when we're sitting at home. We couldn't visualize that it was so well done in a large place. When we kept hearing that description, you really felt very safe.

**Gabriella:** I tell my friends and coworkers about the precautions we're taking here. The church is being sanitized after every Mass. Everyone wears a mask. We're socially distanced. They're spacing off the pews. So there's a lot of guidelines in place.

**Weston:** The guidelines definitely help. The parish is also not a significant source of spreading the virus. We're doing it right, and the numbers show that we're a safe place to be.



*Gabriella Ferri, St. Catherine of Siena Catechist and Reader*

**Gabriella, you're a Reader. Why do that in the middle of a pandemic?**

**Gabriella:** I've been a Religious Ed teacher for eight years. I've loved doing that. I really wanted to branch out and contribute even more to the parish. When I heard Father ask for additional Readers, I immediately signed up. We



went into Covid right when I got approved to be a Reader, so I wasn't able to read until the church reopened. I've been looking forward to it, and I'm glad to get back. I wear my mask until I take it off to read, and I feel completely safe.

### **Why not just participate virtually & watch from home?**

**Tom:** We are meant to be here physically close to God and share that experience with one another. Of course you can find God in any setting no matter where you are, but this is meant to be the place where we can connect in the most intimate and deepest way. Staying home helped me more clearly understand why it's so meaningful and important.

So we were quite eager to get back to Mass and reconnect. While we appreciate the efforts that Father Marcello and the rest of the team here at St. Catherine's made to create a virtual experience, there is no doubt it's not the same.

**Moira:** I missed the people that I always see in church. So that's another reason it was so nice to come back: to see the people I hadn't seen in a really long time.

**Ann:** Lots of people in my age group don't know

how to get to the livestream Mass. And they were so lonely. So the livestream, although a comfort – it was the only thing – but it wasn't anything like a replacement. Many people have been so scared, but now we're getting to be the vaccination crowd. I just heard from a couple that came for their first time

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since the pandemic yesterday. They called me to get the ropes. They told me already that they just feel 10 feet tall after coming for the first time. And wish they had tried to come sooner.

**Skip:** Virtual Mass was better than not having the opportunity to worship at all. I give a lot of credit to those who made it happen. Not the easiest thing to create, it was something we were grateful to have. But when it first became possible to come back in

person, we were emphatic that we would get one of those reserved spots. Livestream is the next best thing, but it's not the same. And we really wanted to have the congregation back together with some of that socialization that goes on. That shared experience is something that is difficult to replicate virtually.

**Weston:** We want to live our lives to the fullest in the best way possible that is pleasing to the Lord. I feel like – and maybe you do too, Gabriella – that if we stay home and just watch it on TV, we just don't feel as fulfilled as we would coming here.

**Gabriella:** There is such a difference in receiving the Body of Christ. You can only get that at in person Mass. It's wonderful, a gift that we've been given. So I want to take full advantage of that.

**What was it like to receive the Eucharist for the first time after such a long time?**

**Tom:** Receiving the Eucharist is a privilege as a member of the Catholic Church. Being able to receive once again helped me to reconnect with God, and to feel more deeply grateful to be a member of St. Catherine's and

to be a practicing Catholic. It's very much a part of who we are. Without it, we experienced a noticeably empty feeling. To be able to receive it again was very uplifting.

**Ann:** It was so holy, so warm. That was the whole reason really. We were so ready for the Mass and the Eucharist. The livestreaming helped a lot of us. We knew it was the only option. But it was wonderful to return. When there were just a few coming down the aisle to receive Communion – because there were just a few people – you couldn't see their expressions with their mask, but there was a feeling. It was wonderful.

**Skip:** The precautions and procedures underscored the high sacred nature of receiving the Eucharist. It created a new way of receiving – staying 6 feet apart, Father sanitizing his hands between each parishioner coming up for the Eucharist. It elevated that portion of the Mass even more because it was now really highlighted as something different. This was where the true closeness of the Mass comes into you, and so again is something that is difficult to replicate virtually.



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**Weston:** Being a new convert, I wasn't always used to taking the Eucharist and believing in the Transubstantiation of Christ in Holy Communion. I was just getting started. I felt like I was I was being brave, and courageous and defiant coming in every other weekend or as many weekends as we could to receive Holy Communion. It was fulfilling.

**Gabriella:** Definitely yes. When you're home, you have distractions. It's just totally different. Here with the music, community, with receiving the Body of Christ, it's so fulfilling.

**What would you say to people who are afraid to come back to Mass?**

**Tom:** It's important that people resume their regular pre-pandemic habits as best they can. That's what helps us overcome our fears. I certainly understand people have different viewpoints on the pandemic. So not everyone is super comfortable. But returning to Mass is really a great opportunity to help you overcome any fear you may have. God is waiting for you. Personally, faith has helped me navigate the pandemic quite well. I relied on my faith in my daily prayer habits and coming to Mass as often as we can. I would encourage anybody who is on the fence about returning to Mass to take that step and know that this is a safe and healthy environment to be in. God is inviting you back and really hoping that you will take the step you need to overcome that fear with His help.

**Moira:** I would say fear is big, for sure, but God is bigger. You don't realize that until you walk in. Once you're back in His presence, that fear goes away.

**Tom:** That's a great point. The moment you walk in the door, you feel that sense of familiarity and comfort that you had before the pandemic. It's very reassuring that you're moving in the right direction;



that you're where you're supposed to be. Plus, it can be an accelerant in overcoming fears in other areas of your life that have been brought on by the pandemic.

**Moira:** Right. You forget when you've been away so long, you forget what it's like. When I walked in today, it smelled like baptism to me here. And that's a comforting smell to me. So just the minute you walk in, you're put at ease.

**Ann:** I've had lots of people ask me: Do you really feel safe, Ann? Really? And I say I couldn't feel safer. Come in and see for yourself. Keep your mask. Do your hands. Walk in and out carefully. We have been safe right along, as safe as you could be anywhere you're doing your other chores.

**Gabriella:** I'd encourage – especially those who are now starting to branch out by going to the grocery store, getting gas, being in public and doing other such things – then why wouldn't you come to mass? We have family and friends who have been in quarantine this entire time. They are pretty strict about it and haven't gone out. We've done our best to let them know what we're doing in our lives and why this is a step we've taken and try to encourage others to attend mass.

**Weston:** Pray about it. Take a day or a moment even to pray about it and figure out what you need

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to do personally. Whether it's at St. Catherine's or not. I think with the vaccine, you can have confidence to come in every Sunday. That's the key probably. Get the vaccine and come in.

**Gabriella:** Even without the vaccine, if you can't take it for whatever reason, and you're concerned about coming in, I would just reiterate all of the safety protocols that we're taking.

Your thought to pray on it and make your own best personal decision is right.

### **What are some of the things the Parish has done to keep people safe?**

**Tom:** I'm probably more comfortable than the average person. Having said that, and for those who might not be as comfortable, there were certain steps which I noticed and appreciated even with my comfort level. We had the welcoming person at the front door who made sure that you had taken the step to register, and followed that rule. Everything is marked out in the church with blue tape to make very clear where it's safe to be and not to be. Hand sanitation stations are available as well. People have been very respectful and reasonable with one another in church knowing that not everybody has the same level of comfort. I think everyone has really risen to the occasion and been the best version of themselves here. I've even noticed

people being particularly polite during communion to give a little bit more space as they come out of their pew and make their way up the aisle. So I've been really impressed with everyone's actions during this time in church.

**Moira:** I think the parish is doing everything they can to keep it as safe as possible. Everyone is wearing a mask. The celebrant wears a mask, except when they're speaking. I have not attended any mass with music. I know that singing is sometimes a fear for some. That hasn't happened at any of the masses I've attended.

**Gabriella:** We talk about this all the time. We go out to eat, as safely as we can. We go grocery shopping, and other things. There are guidelines and precautions in place in these places, but does everybody follow them? Do you feel safe? Not once looking around the church have I seen anybody with their mask "chin strap" or off to the side. Everyone is obeying the guidelines set to keep everybody safe. People are stepping up to the altar to receive appropriately, socially distanced. I think people are taking it much more seriously here than at the grocery store, where they will come right up next to you & lean over you to grab a product off the shelf. They invade your bubble, and they don't seem to mind at all. So I'd say I feel more comfortable here than some other places.

**Weston:** We've even gone to other churches and can see that St. Catherine's is doing it a little bit better.

### **How do they handle distribution of communion?**

**Moira:** For communion, the floor is marked basically every step of the way: right before you approach the priest, as you're approaching the priest, and then when you approach the priest. Before you receive, you're asked to sanitize your hands. You can use your own personal hand sanitizer or you can use the church provided hand sanitizer. You leave your mask on even when you say "Amen." You only remove your mask to receive the host. If you prefer to receive it on the tongue, the priest will sanitize his hands between each communicant. So it's very clean and safe.

### **What did it mean to you to see Father Marcello doing all he could to keep us engaged in the faith?**

**Tom:** I have been very impressed with Father Marcello's leadership. He's been proactive both with his communication and his actions, keeping the parishioners' best interests in mind from the very beginning. He recognized early on how hard it is for people to not have access to Mass, so he really went above and beyond with his efforts to create alternate experiences. When we were able to return to Mass, he worked hard to create a safe and healthy environment for everybody. I also want to thank the team at St. Catherine's. It was clear that everyone was on the same page in how to create a safe environment as well as a meaningful experience for people returning to church.

**Moira:** I'm sure this has been frustrating for Father Marcello as well as the parish staff. But Father is so positive. When you exude that positivity and hopefulness, it's very contagious. That is the feeling that you get from him. We're in a tricky situation, but we're going to get through it together. Even if you aren't able to come to live Mass, come in to pick up a bulletin. You can feel very involved just looking at the things people are doing. That makes you feel like a part of the community. There's been more outreach during the pandemic than previously, which has been a real positive outcome of this situation.

**Tom:** That's a really good point about Father Marcello's optimism. One thing I've noticed during the pandemic with successful leaders is that despite the many challenges they face, no matter what kind of organization they lead, the ones that have created a sense of momentum, even in the most difficult times, are the ones that have really had the most impact on the groups and organizations they lead. I did notice that early on, Father Marcello never stopped. He pivoted, but he kept moving forward. That's very reassuring, and a great signal to send to parishioners: we are going to get through this. It's not how we want it to be for now, but just stay with me and I will take you forward. When we emerge, we'll be in a better place.

**Moira:** There was no "woe is me" feeling. I remember last Easter, which I know is Father Marcello's favorite time of year. No one could come to Easter

Sunday Mass, which was sad for sure. Father said “although we can’t be together, it’s still a wonderful day because Christ is risen.” He really does help us remember how to stay focused on what’s most important.

**Skip:** All of the accommodations – the livestreaming, drive through confessions – made to allow people to worship in some way were an extraordinary effort. That starts with Father Marcello’s leadership for certain. I have developed a close personal relationship with Father. We’ve talked about some of the gut-wrenching decisions he had to make and the things he had to do in order to make himself feel comfortable that his flock would be safe coming here once again. Certainly, the last thing he would want was for an outbreak to hit the parish. And fortunately, thanks be to God, we’ve avoided anything like that. The enlistment of volunteer and professional staff created a tremendous sense of confidence. I think people were so anxious to get back. If they could gain the sense that it would be ok; it was going to be done well; it was going to be done safely, then they would then get over whatever fear they might have. The fact that such effort had been taken was of consummate importance to us. The communications were important too: Father’s letters while church was closed, what we needed to do this right, were all very reassuring and comforting. It got us to the point where we were ready to make that decision on day one. I know others are coming to that decision more slowly. I’m hopeful now as the limits have gone from 100 to 185 that folks will be more comfortable coming back.

**Gabriella:** Absolutely. Father Marcello has done a great job at leading our parish. From the onset, getting the masses on the live feed so everyone could attend Mass virtually while the church was shut down was the biggest and best first step we all took. And Father has definitely gone above and



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beyond by conducting drive-through confessions, and all the other opportunities afforded to us at this time. I think it helps keep people tied to the church and tied to community and feeling less desperate in these times. I listen to Catholic Radio on Sirius XM and I hear stories from people calling in from their different churches: how long they were shut down versus us, how different places in the country are struggling with it. We are really blessed have been able to stay on track due to Father’s efforts.

**Weston:** There has been no lack of communication. The staff has done a great job. Since we’re getting married, Father Marcello

has been in touch with us about our marriage counseling and meeting about scheduling the wedding. So he’s been in constant contact, which has been really professional and very helpful. It gives you a lot of hope to know that someone is working on helping you with your spiritual life.

**Gabriella:** Father said he saw record numbers of people showing up for Ash Wednesday. I am so impressed by that and it really caught me off guard. Sometimes in times of trial, people will turn away from faith. I feel with Covid a lot of people turned to faith. It’s a nice thing to see.

**Weston:** It makes you wonder about how many people will be here for Easter. I feel like it should be a lot. With the governor’s restrictions lessening, we’re wondering if the pews will be full capacity.



### **How did that momentum help you in your personal prayer lives?**

**Tom:** When a crisis arises or circumstances are not going the way you'd like, some people see it as an opportunity to stop what they're doing. They make excuses about why they can't continue. When I see leaders who continue their momentum, really leading on behalf of their people, it reminds me that in some small way, I should be doing the same thing. It reminds me to keep going, even though it's easy to stop, but it's the right thing to do. There's great value because you'll be better positioned on the other side.

**Weston:** It's helped. Especially being engaged to be married in the church and being active parishioners. We want to do good in the world. I think this is baseline of figuring out your life goals: coming to church, the Eucharist, following the commandments, praying to God, loving Jesus.

**Gabriella:** Last year, the church was shut down. We couldn't celebrate Easter together and that was something I've never experienced in my lifetime. During Lent, I took part in the Diocese's daily rosary. That definitely helped me feel close to the faith when I couldn't attend church in person and still feel connected to the community. That was really important for me.

### **Any final comments?**

**Ann:** Staying home has not been fulfilling. People are staying put because they have to. Over in my village, those 2000 people

who live there, are ready to run out of the houses. And one of the places will be their house of worship. We just happen to have a very invitational, inspirational setting here that is so well managed, so safe, so loving. This is a great place to run to!

**Skip:** It's one of the most welcoming parishes I've ever been associated with. I grew up as an Altar Boy at St. Augustine's parish while Bishop Curtis was in the seat. I was one of his traveling team of Altar Boys, so I have a long history with several different parishes. I have not been in one that is this welcoming, which has a lot to do with the culture and the approach that Father Marcello takes. With that in mind, there is – again not to take anything away from the hard work that's been done to provide virtual streaming masses online, etc. – it's just not the same: the fellowship, the fraternal feeling, the camaraderie of the full congregation, is not replaceable at home. I'm seeing this even in my professional life. Everything is a zoom call these days or a Teams meeting, all virtual. I make my living with in-person visits. While it's the next best thing, it's just not the same. My encouragement would be for folks to recognize that if you're going to branch out at all, going to go to the supermarket, or a movie theater, or for a walk to a park with a small group, that this will be among the safest places that you can come as you venture back out following this year of lockdown we've all experienced. And I'd encourage you to consider doing that here.



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