

*Mother of God and our Mother,
pray for us to God, the Father of mercies
that this great suffering may end
and that hope and peace may dawn anew. Amen.*

~Pope Francis



A SYNOPSIS OF PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS
FOR THE
REOPENING OF CHURCHES
AND THE RESUMPTION OF PUBLIC MASSES



FEDERATION OF DIOCESAN LITURGICAL COMMISSIONS

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WITH SINCERE APPRECIATION TO

The members of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions – clergy and lay -- who so generously share their resources and their research among the dioceses of the United States. For over fifty years, your wisdom and your ability to network have selflessly served the Church of the United States.

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The USCCB Secretariat for Divine Worship, especially for preparing national prayer services.

Other national organizations have posted resources on their websites, e.g., NCCL, NFCYM, NPM.

In collating this brief guideline, I have drawn on the wisdom of multiple diocesan guidelines and policies; I have curated the discussions on the FDLIC Listserve. In addition, I have been enlightened by articles and online webinars. Special thanks to Dr. Jerry Galipeau, Mrs. Vickie Klima, Father J. Michael Joncas, Father Michael Nolan, Matt Reichert, and Dr. David Shapiro, MD. ■ RT

INTRODUCTION

“...the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. ... In the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members” (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 7). This will always be true.

Certainly, we value the communal nature of our liturgies and the inherent value of our community of faith and parish life. But these are not normal times. We have learned to adjust, temporarily, to a new normal of participating at Mass in front of a television or computer screen. We long for the sacraments and have relied upon the tradition of Spiritual Communion. We even celebrated the holiest days of our liturgical year in our living rooms – finding solace in the liturgy’s rich symbols, sacred texts, and ancient traditions. We stayed apart because this, too, is part of living in light of the Gospel.

In solidarity with the entire Body of Christ, we are aware of our obligation to respect our liturgical traditions, but also our obligation to respect the dignity of every human life – a dignity which the Church has always defended and protected. Our Bishops did not hesitate to suspend Masses and to dispense the faithful from the obligation to attend Mass. During this pandemic, we will continue to champion the Common Good and to conduct our public gatherings in a manner which protects the health of our assemblies and others whom they will encounter. We will continue to mourn the dead and comfort those who mourn them. We will continue to pray for all the sick -- in our cities, in our country and in our world.

We have become accustomed to restrictions in all areas of our lives. Visits among families and friends have been eliminated. Schools are closed and computer screens substitute for classrooms. Stores are boarded and restaurants are shuttered. Travel is restricted and public transportation is limited. We have learned to “stay safe at home” and to conduct meetings and even family gatherings “virtually.” Even entire sports seasons have been canceled. Food supplies are scarce. New, intensive cleaning protocols have become commonplace in stores, on airlines, on city streets, and in our homes. Masks and gloves are now customary attire and may be for a long time. We have come to appreciate that the novel coronavirus is very real and that we must all do our part to “flatten the curve.”

And this is not over! At this writing, over 66,000 lives have been lost in the United States. Some cities have yet to see peak numbers. Hospitals continue to be overwhelmed. Personal Protection Equipment and medicine is in short supply for our valiant healthcare workers and first responders. Scientists continue to conduct research, but a vaccine may take over a year to develop. Federal, state, and local governments are still enacting strict measures. We have come to learn that arbitrary dates and deadlines are unreliable; only broad testing and medical benchmarks can give a true picture of the health of our nation.

Thank you for the many ways you and your parishes have shown God’s love during this pandemic. Thank you for moving so quickly to close churches and schools. Thank you for learning new technologies in order to live stream Masses and for adapting to social media in order to spread the faith. Thank you for the amazing ways you have increased charitable outreach and care for those who are unemployed, hungry, homeless, or alone. And even in the midst of your own fear, thank you for the countless ways that you have sacrificed to serve God’s people.

*Rita A. Thiron, Executive Director
Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions
May 3, 2020*

THE NATURE OF THIS GUIDELINE

No single guideline will meet the needs of every diocese in the United States. Many of you are still under stay-at-home orders in your states. Some states are allowing churches to re-open, but with some restrictions. Some cities have been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus; others have not. Certainly concerns vary from region to region, state to state, and urban to rural communities.

Always, state and federal government guidelines will play a part. These, too, may be updated regularly by medical experts and civil authorities.

This document is merely offered as a template for diocesan liturgical commissions and task forces who have been charged with preparing guidelines for the Local Church. It suggests best practices and sample verbiage. Your own diocesan guidelines may have better ideas or alternative policies.

This document is a compilation of sound liturgical principles as found in the liturgical texts. It draws upon data from regional conference calls, webinars, and meetings. I have listened to your concerns and noted your ideas. This document does not pretend to present chapter and verse on every relevant civil, canonical, or liturgical law; but it will contain general principles, some medical data, and proposed safety measures. It merely offers issues for your consideration. Perhaps it will raise more questions than give answers, but I hope it will be a guide for your own diocesan and parish discussions.

The scope of this document will be limited to the celebration of the Mass. It will not address other sacramental rites.

Finally, this document does not pretend to legislate. Only a diocesan Bishop may produce directives for his (arch)diocese and he will do that in broad consultation with his councils, commissions, and lay experts as well as civil authorities.

*The diocesan Bishop, who is to be regarded as the high priest of his flock,
and from whom the life in Christ of the faithful under his care
in a certain sense derives and upon whom it depends,
must promote, regulate, and be vigilant
over the liturgical life in his diocese...*

*General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 387
quoting the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 41*

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

★THE COMMON GOOD IS OUR PRIORITY -- Our first consideration must be for the health and safety of our parishioners and those whom they will encounter. This is especially true for the most vulnerable members of our populations, including the elderly and those with chronic illnesses. Let's admit to ourselves that while we as clergy, liturgists, and musicians have expertise on liturgical practices and sacramental theology, we must rely on medical personnel and scientists to give the best advice in these matters.

★DEFINE POLICIES IN PHASES -- We suggest that policies and guidelines be implemented in phases. Each phase should be clearly delineated with dates (e.g., July 31) or benchmarks of medical advances (e.g., when tests indicate that new cases are below ten or when a vaccine is available). This will assure consistent practice throughout a diocese or county. Moreover, this makes clear that any variation from normal liturgical practice will be temporary.

★CONTINUE TO OFFER TELEVISED MASSES – The continuation of live-streamed liturgies is of benefit to those who are homebound, sick, or otherwise vulnerable.

★CONSIDER EXTENDING DISPENSATION FROM SUNDAY OBLIGATION -- While we recognize that many are eager to return to Mass in our churches, it remains important for those who are elderly and otherwise at risk to refrain from returning to public liturgies until it is manifestly safe to do so. All the faithful -- especially those who are sick, at high risk of becoming sick, and their caregivers, may, by decree of their diocesan (arch)bishop, continue to be dispensed from their Sunday obligation until a time certain (See Code of Canon Law nos. 1245, 1248.2).

★PRESERVE THE LITURGICAL YEAR – Even in the darkest days of the pandemic, the Holy Father and his Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments made clear that Easter would not be “postponed.” Liturgical seasons preceded it and followed it. Similarly, the entire course of the liturgical year is to be maintained and the primacy of Sunday is to be respected (*General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, 4; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2177).

★COMMUNICATION IS KEY -- Whenever directives are initiated or updated, they should be communicated to all the faithful. While clergy and parish staffs may be the first line of communication, the instructions should be clearly communicated to every parishioner. This might come in the form of a letter from the Bishop or pastor, a video posted on the diocesan or parish website, and/or an e-mail blast to every household. Be sure to also communicate with specific groups, e.g., the Parish Council, liturgical ministers, school parents, senior citizen groups, nursing home residents, youth groups, etc. This allows each parishioner to take ownership of the endeavor and to feel like they are part of the effort to keep everyone safe.

★THINK LONG TERM – Understandably, everyone is anxious to return to normalcy. But the threat of the coronavirus is still very much with us. Even now, some areas of the country continue to experience new cases and increased fatality rates. Social distancing, the wearing of masks, and increased cleaning procedures will be with us for a very long time. This will certainly impact the way we worship and the rituals which are a vital part of our faith.

SAFETY AND HYGIENE IN OUR WORSHIP SPACES

The following norms should be observed in our churches and other public spaces.

- When in doubt, err on the side of caution.
- Baptismal fonts and holy water stoops should remain empty.
- Water for baptism is to be changed and blessed before each baptism. As always, blessed water should be properly disposed of in the ground.
- Vessels should continue to be washed after each Mass in hot soapy water.
- All liturgical vestments, including server albs, are to be regularly cleaned.
- High use areas within the church should be wiped down with disinfectant before and after each liturgy. This will include pews, chairs, and ambos.
- Hand rails, Door handles, push plates, and knobs should be wiped down after each liturgy. Doors might be propped open to lessen contact.
- Restroom facilities should be sanitized after each liturgy and regularly.
- The liturgical environment should be considered, too. Reflect the liturgical season, but keep all decorations at a minimum (less surfaces to clean or attract germs).
- All hymnals and missalettes (and other items) should be removed from the pews and stored for the duration of the pandemic. At each Mass, disposable worship aids should be distributed, then discarded. Alternately, the use of digital projection and screens is encouraged. As always, appropriate copyright licenses are to be respected.
- Make a plan. Many individual house of worship were ready with a plan. They already had hand sanitizers and cleaning supplies in stock; staff and volunteers knew their responsibilities; and technology was ready. If you do not have a written emergency plan, make one now.
- Supplies of disinfectant or hand sanitizers may be limited. Plan ahead.
- As one emergency room doctor put it, “If you can’t take this seriously, stay closed.”

SAFETY AND HYGIENE: THE DUTY OF EVERY INDIVIDUAL

- Those who are sick or symptomatic should stay home!
- Wash hands at home and use hand sanitizer upon entering the church.
- Face masks should be mandated for all assembly members over the age of two.
- Presiders, too, should consider the use of face masks especially in proximity to communicants.
- Pastors should make every effort to clearly communicate good hygienic practices and liturgical alterations to their parishioners in light of continuing public health concerns.

SOCIAL DISTANCING

- Pastors and ushers should make every effort to ensure appropriate social distancing before, during, and after liturgical celebrations. Methods will vary in light of the capacity of church buildings.
- Map it out; perhaps use engineers and mathematicians to determine proper spacing.
- Other than family/household units, worshippers should be seated six feet apart in all directions.
- These principles also apply to chapels and other smaller rooms on the parish campus.
- Consider various ways of admitting a limited number of people – perhaps tickets, reservations for a particular Mass, or an online system such as Eventbrite or Eventbee.
- Can Masses be live streamed into a secondary space, e.g. the school gym?
- “Cry Rooms” should be closed and locked. Those parishes who utilize these spaces for families with small children should make clear that these rooms are not available.
- The location of stations for the distribution of Holy Communion might have to be reconsidered.
- The location of the Presider’s Chair and other seating in the sanctuary might have to be reconsidered.
- Appropriate spacing between individuals in the Communion Procession should be prepared, perhaps utilizing tape on the flooring or guides on the ends of pews.
- Music Ministers, including small choirs and ensembles, should also adhere to social distancing. Large choirs should be discontinued until it is safe to resume.
- Parishes should discourage any large gatherings before or after Mass.
- Perhaps dismiss the assembly row by row, as one might do at a funeral.
- Liturgies that would unduly crowd church buildings (e.g. First Communion, Confirmation, etc.) should be adjusted or duplicated to ensure smaller crowds.
- If pastorally advantageous or possible, a temporary adjustment in the weekend Mass schedule might be considered to ensure proper social distancing. Perhaps add a Mass on Saturday evenings and Sundays.

WELCOME BACK! GUIDELINES FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY

COMMUNICATION

- Communicate ahead of time with the entire parish. Give the people a preview of what social distancing or other precautions will be in place. Mail a letter from the pastor, send an e-mail blast, and/or post a video on the parish website or Facebook page.
- Especially let them know the revised capacity of your church. The number of people will be limited by space or civil decree. Advise them on any plans for tickets, online reservations, or ushers counting people at the doors.
- Parishioners may not be able to sit in their “usual spot” or capacity may be limited. Parking may be rearranged.
- Let them know if masks may be required or if hand-sanitizer will be available.
- Advertise any new Mass schedule or additional Masses

LITURGICAL MINISTERS

- You will still need greeters and ushers. How will they be trained? These volunteers should be aware of any new procedures. Moreover, they should anticipate the need to gently deal with some chaos and fear for the first few weeks. What will they look for? They are not there to “police” but some rules might put the people at ease.
- You will need a full contingent of liturgical ministers, perhaps even more Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion to distribute the Body of Christ.
- Educate all liturgical ministers so that they, in turn, can model good practices.

SETTING THE TONE

- Give thanks to almighty God for what he has done for us!
- Do not simply begin with ‘Our Opening Hymn is...’ Acknowledge what they are feeling. Prepare a written, heartfelt “welcome back” and express why it is so good for all of us to gather once again around the Lord’s Table.
- Acknowledge the fact that we are all still very cautious and it will take time to get back to the ways we once did things.
- Your assemblies have been watching Mass on television and will need encouragement to fully participate again (even through masks).
- Mention any restrictions, such as, no handshake at the Sign of Peace or any changes to the distribution of Holy Communion.
- Use music that makes the assembly feel “at home.” Hymns should relate to the readings, but consider using familiar melodies and texts. Use familiar Mass settings.
- Do not fail to mention those in the parish who may have died since we last gathered together, particularly those who have died from the virus.
- Do not fail to mention that we remain thankful for healthcare workers, first responders, and essential workers.
- Do not fail to thank all those in the parish who have been so generous in responding to the needs of the poor, the hungry, and the unemployed.

LITURGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

MUSIC MINISTRY

- Temporarily, music ministry may be limited – perhaps one cantor and one instrumentalist to lead the assembly.
- Social distancing rules will apply to ensembles and scholas as well.
- Remove hymnals and missalettes from pews and store them. Use projection and screens or produce a simple, disposable worship aid for every Mass.
- Always respect copyrights for printed or mechanical reproduction. Contact publishers for annual licenses.
- In light of this, you might need to reconsider repertoire. Perhaps choose hymns texts and tunes which people easily know.
- Consider the increased use of psalmody and their antiphons, certainly part of our rich Tradition.
- Consider the use of music with repetitive refrains or Taizé style hymns.
- At appropriate parts of the Mass, consider texts and tunes which bring comfort.
- Consider the need for longer hymns at the Communion Rite. Perhaps plan “bridges” between multiple hymns. Communicants will be spaced apart in procession.
- Assume that everyone will be singing through masks. Some scientists contend that saliva may spread as far as 26 feet.
- Clean the keyboard, cantor stand, and instruments between Masses.

PREPARATIONS BEFORE MASS

- Bread and wine should continue to be kept from public areas (brought only from the credence table).
- Priests, deacons, and all liturgical ministers should model good hygienic practices before, during, and after Mass. Presiders, deacons, and EMHC’s may continue to discreetly use hand sanitizer before Mass, before the Communion Procession, and after Mass.
- When the liturgical day permits, consider using the new Mass texts from Pope Francis – “Masses for Various Needs and Occasions: In the Time of Pandemic.” The orations and readings for this Mass may be found on the FDLC website in several languages <https://fdlc.org/covid>
- See the section entitled “Welcome Back...” for ideas on announcements and introductory comments.

THE INTRODUCTORY RITES

- Processions through the assembly at the beginning and end of Mass should be re-examined.
- Be mindful of the options available for the Penitential Act.
- Will the Gloria be sung or recited?
- Consider placing a stand near the presider's chair to hold the Roman Missal. This eliminates the need for the server to stand so close to the presider when he prays the Collect.

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

- The *Introduction to the Lectionary for Mass* calls for two distinct readers to proclaim the Sunday readings (no. 52). How might this be temporarily re-imagined? Where do the readers sit? How will they approach the ambo?
- The Deacon, or in his absence, the priest, proclaims the Gospel (ILM, 50)
- The Presider should take into consideration the reading, the orations, and the current health of his city and country when preparing the homily (ILM, 38-41).
- Minimize page turns with carefully arranged ribbons.
- As always, be sure to include the needs of the whole world when composing the Universal Prayers (Prayers of the Faithful). Include the names of parishioners who have died and also remember those victims who have died from the virus locally and worldwide.

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

- The gifts of bread and wine may be brought to the altar simply from the credence table in the sanctuary.
- Consider alternatives to "passing the basket" for the collection. Could offerings be placed in a large basket near the sanctuary? Could long-handled collection plates be used (and regularly cleaned). Could online donation services be utilized?
- Handshakes can exchange many germs. Doctors recommend that there be no physical contact during the Sign of Peace nor the Lord's Prayer.

Communion Rite

- It is within the competence of the Conference of Bishops to determine the manner of receiving Holy Communion (GIRM 160, 283, 390).
- It is within the authority of the local Bishop to establish the norms for the distribution of Holy Communion under both kinds (GIRM 387).
- As determined by the local bishop, for a time, the assembly should not receive the Precious Blood from the chalice.
- As determined by the local bishop, for a time, the reception of Holy Communion on the tongue may be prohibited. Medical personnel have emphasized that saliva is one of the worst fluids for transmission.
- The use of gloves to distribute Holy Communion is no more effective than distributing with the bare hand. Indeed, gloves would have to be changed for each communicant. Use of tongs or other instruments would, likewise, come into contact with each communicant's hands.
- Perhaps consider the purchase of larger hosts which would minimize the contact between minister and communicant.
- The Communion Rite is an essential and unmovable element of the Order of Mass (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, nos. 22.3, 50, 55, 56).

ON RECEIVING IN THE HAND

I believe there has always been a certain amount of liturgical practice praeter ius (apart from the law) and contra ius (contrary to law).

It would be my opinion that practices contrary to the law should not take place without a clearly justifiable reason. I think the present pandemic is a very justifiable reason to require Holy Communion in the hand if the local ordinary determines that will be the practice in his jurisdiction.

No one has the right to endanger the life of another even unknowingly by demanding Communion on the tongue when the persons following could be exposed to a virus of which the oral recipient is not yet aware.

There is a great tradition in our faith of "sacrifice." I make the sacrifice to receive in a way that protects the whole community. Moreover, how does one respect the Sacred Species if one is willing to burden it with the possibility of contagion?

*Fr. Mike Nolan, JCL, DMin
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GENERAL INSTRUCTION OF THE ROMAN MISSAL

281. Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it is distributed under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clear expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the relationship between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father's Kingdom.

282. Sacred pastors should take care to ensure that the faithful who participate in the rite or are present at it are as fully aware as possible of the Catholic teaching on the form of Holy Communion as set forth by the Ecumenical Council of Trent. Above all, they should instruct the Christian faithful that the Catholic faith teaches that Christ, whole and entire, and the true Sacrament, is received even under only one species, and consequently that as far as the effects are concerned, those who receive under only one species are not deprived of any of the grace that is necessary for salvation.

They are to teach, furthermore, that the Church, in her stewardship of the Sacraments, has the power to set forth or alter whatever provisions, apart from the substance of the Sacraments, that she judges to be most conducive to the veneration of the Sacraments and the well-being of the recipients, in view of changing conditions, times, and places. At the same time, the faithful should be encouraged to seek to participate more eagerly in this sacred rite, by which the sign of the Eucharistic banquet is made more fully evident.

CONCLUDING RITE

- The Presider may make full use of the options for blessings, taking into account the liturgical season and the needs of the faithful.
- A concluding hymn is not, officially, mentioned in the Order of Mass.
- A pastor may consider how to safely disperse the assembly in small numbers so as to respect social distancing guidelines.

OTHER GUIDELINES OF NOTE

CENTER FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (CDC)

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

includes how to disinfect, where to disinfect.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html> Answers to frequently-asked questions

IMPORTANT NOTE: This week, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention will release its recommendation on the re-opening of worship spaces. A copy of the 17-page draft was published April 27 by *The Washington Post*. The article stated that faith communities should consider limiting their public gatherings in the first phase of reopening and offer means of virtual participation for those in vulnerable conditions.

In all the gradual stages of reopening, the draft of the report recommends that faith communities consider temporarily limiting the sharing of hymnals or other worship materials and consider using a collection box in one place instead of passing collection baskets. It also suggests not having choir or music groups during services at this time or at least limiting the number of choir members and keeping them at least six feet apart.

In all phases of reopening, the draft of the report urges people to continue good hygiene practices and make sure that everyone over the age of 2 wear cloth face coverings at all gatherings and keeping social distancing when inside, apart from those who live in the same household. The guidance also says all buildings should be checked for proper ventilation systems and circulation of air with open windows or fans.

The White House consulted four Catholic bishops on this project (from New Mexico, Texas, and Montana). In mid-April, the White House had issued a plan for gradual reopening to take place in three phases, with large venues reopening under strict social distancing rules and schools and day-care centers remaining closed. This newer guidance will offer more specific recommendations for how places in the country can best reopen, stressing that all decisions should be made locally in collaboration with local health officials.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

<https://www.who.int/publications-detail/practical-considerations-and-recommendations-for-religious-leaders-and-faith-based-communities-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

THOMISTIC INSTITUTE (Dominican House of Studies in Washington)

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/580e5b23579fb3fdc10ab03c/t/5eab382772d9460d3e375c76/1588279335659/Guidelines+for+Mass+%284.28.2020%29.pdf>

Note: This guideline has been distributed to all bishops. While it has many fine points, it has some points with which individual bishops might disagree. For example, it suggests that Communion on the tongue is possible and the document gives an option for Communion after Mass (with hand sanitizer in between communicants).

SAMPLE DIOCESAN GUIDELINES

(Arch) Diocese	Website Link	<i>These will be updated regularly.</i>
Honolulu, HI	https://www.catholicahawaii.org/media/649809/bishops-memo-to-diocese-covid-19-directives-5-1-2020.pdf	
Burlington, VT	https://www.vermontcatholic.org/covid-19/	
Jefferson City	https://diojeffcity.org/blog/2020/04/28/instructions-28-april-public-masses/	
Orlando	https://www.orlandodiocese.org/bishop-noonans-reopening-message/	

★ Please check with your own Bishop for diocesan decrees and updates.

★ Please check with local authorities who may have guidelines and policies for public gatherings in your area.