

Diocese of Trenton



Liturgical-Pastoral Directives in a Time of Pandemic Limited Public Celebration of the Mass and Sacraments in Church

***PROPOSED DATE: for public “in Church” weekend Masses
Solemnity of The Body and Blood of Christ, June 13-14, 2020***

PROPOSED DATE: for public “in Church” weekday Masses: Monday, June 8, 2020

Introductory Remarks

COVID 19 is still a virulent contagious virus communicated between people. Everyone should remain conscious and alert that risks to either contract or spread the disease remain possible at any gathering of people, indoors or outdoors. The risk is considered by public health experts to be especially significant indoors at prolonged, sedentary gatherings where coughing, sneezing and even talking/singing could easily communicate the coronavirus.

Those who are frightened, those with a COVID 19 diagnosis or symptoms, those who may be asymptomatic carriers, those not feeling well, those with underlying health conditions or those in a high risk category should avoid public gatherings of any kind whether indoors or outdoors.

As Bishop of the Diocese of Trenton, I have been entrusted by the Church with the responsibility to exercise care for the spiritual needs of the faithful. I cannot do that effectively if I ignore their physical health and well-being or put that health and the common good at risk. For that reason, heeding the advice of public health officials and other scientific data, I directed the clergy and faithful of the Diocese to follow the courses of action we have pursued for the past several months.

The Catholic faithful, however, need the Eucharist for their spiritual health and well-being. It is an essential part of Catholic life and we cannot continue to do without the Eucharist and other sacraments indefinitely. The COVID 19 pandemic introduced temporary yet necessary sacrifices into our lives as Catholics. The faithful have carried the accompanying spiritual burdens heroically. Our clergy and I have shared those burdens, too, deprived as we have been of the opportunity to exercise many of the pastoral and liturgical ministries for which we have been ordained as bishop, priests and deacons. It has been our common goal during this pandemic to minister as best we could in the hope that the gradual restoration of full Catholic life would occur as soon as possible.

A dispensation from Sunday/Holy Day obligation has been granted so that the faithful could “stay home” in good conscience. Masses and pastoral messages have been live-streamed by our priests to keep our Catholic faith consistent and strong. Churches have been re-opened for private prayer. Outdoor, “in car” Masses have been provided wherever safely and worthily possible, giving the faithful who were/are able the opportunity to be nourished again by Christ’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

Balancing the physical, public health precautions deemed necessary with the spiritual good of the faithful, I have decided to resume limited opportunities for the faithful to return to their parish churches, while maintaining the necessary, required public health precautions present in the CDC Guidelines, as the Diocese gradually and safely moves toward the full restoration of Catholic spiritual and sacramental life. The Post-Pandemic Parish Task Force of Pastors (P4) that I established on May 3, 2020, under the leadership of Monsignor Thomas Gervasio, vicar general, has developed the following “Directives” that I am mandating to be observed for participation at “in Church” public Masses and sacramental administrations throughout the Diocese of Trenton. I have maintained contact with the Governor and his chief counsel regarding these directives.

Common Directives to be Observed by All Parishes Until Further Notice

The dispensation from Sunday/Holy Day Mass obligation remains in effect until Monday, September 7 (unless otherwise announced). The fulfillment of the Easter Duty may be accomplished before the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020. The teachings of the Church regarding ‘Easter Duty’, as reflected in both the Catechism and the Code of Canon Law, indicate that there is an obligation to receive these Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist --- preceded by sacramental confession, if conscious of grave sin ---at least once a year, usually during the Easter season, unless there is a “just reason” that requires its fulfillment at another time of the year. In the Diocese of Trenton, it has been impossible to fulfill these obligations until the sacraments are readily available again. In short, the presence of the COVID-19 situation is a “just reason” to delay the fulfillment of this duty and thus the obligation is moved to a time in the future when these sacraments are available again.

Parish churches may begin the celebration of limited “in church” public weekend Masses --- with no more than 1/3 occupancy --- on June 13-14, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, observing all requirements listed below. Weekday “in church” public Masses --- with no more than 25 persons attending --- may begin on Monday, June 8, 2020, observing the same requirements. Pastors will determine the most fair and effective ways to ensure proper observance of those numbers.

Those who are hesitant or fearful because of COVID 19 concerns as well as those with a COVID 19 diagnosis or symptoms, those who may be asymptomatic carriers, those not feeling well, those with underlying health conditions or those in a high risk category should stay home and avoid any public gathering.

Mass schedules in church are to be determined by pastors and an alternate location may be selected in accordance with parish needs and local guidelines. If not on church property, all necessary permits and insurance coverage should be obtained.

A single entrance to the church should be utilized to monitor the number of people attending. All doors can be used for exiting church. Pastors and their staffs should devise a plan for an orderly exit from the church, eg., dismissal pew by pew.

Receptacles for parish offerings/collections should be placed at the entrance and all exits. Parishioners should be made aware and reminded of the presence of these receptacles and of on-line opportunities to support their parish in this time of special need.

The maximum percentage of seating mentioned above will determine the number of Masses necessary to accommodate the corresponding number of parishioners, keeping in mind the amount of time necessary to sanitize the church between Masses.

In parishes where seating is too small to accommodate a sufficient number of parishioners, outdoor Masses may be offered, observing all public health precautions listed in these Directives. Pastors should first consider as OPTIONS parish halls or auditoriums, etc., for overflow or provide both indoor and outdoor Masses.

Live-streaming of Masses shall continue, as determined by pastors.

Group devotional observances, including Children's Liturgy of the Word and parish social gatherings are suspended until further notice.

No public gatherings or greetings before or after Masses, at church entrances/exits or on parish property are permitted.

All missals, hymnals, printed materials, pamphlets, etc., must be removed from churches.

Sanitation of church before and after each Mass, using approved methods is mandatory.

Consult online resources for recommended cleaning: e.g.

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

Holy Water fonts or receptacles are to remain empty.

Pastors may leave public restrooms open provided they are sanitized regularly.

A cantor may sing from the choir loft, or behind a clear screen when in front of the assembly. Congregational singing is discouraged to prevent any possible spread of COVID 19. Choirs are not to be used.

All directives should be posted in online parish bulletins, websites, social media, and church entrances.

Masks must be worn at all indoor/outdoor public Masses; regular hand washing with soap/water or alcohol-based sanitizer brought from home should take place; social distancing (6 feet) between groups of people from the same household and any other groups/individuals and between single individuals must be maintained at all indoor/outdoor Masses. Marking off pews is recommended.

The usual presentation of offertory gifts and physical contact of any kind at the sign of peace is prohibited.

Communion is restricted to the Sacred Host only and no chalice may be offered or shared. Communion in the hand is strongly preferred. A dispensation is granted for Communion in the hand for Masses in the Extraordinary Form. Where Communion is given on the tongue, the priest must sanitize hands between communicants.

The following methods for distribution of Holy Communion by the priest, deacon or, as necessary, extraordinary minister are suggested:

- Usual Communion line with social distancing (6 feet) between communicants in line
- Passing in between pews, as for anointing at Masses of Anointing of the Sick

Priests will not receive or gather the faithful after the Mass.

Directives for Mass Celebrants and other Ministers

- Wash or sanitize hands before and after Mass
- Celebrants should not wear a mask while offering the Mass, but only while distributing Holy Communion
- Social distancing must be practiced in the sanctuary
- Short homilies should be given
- Cover hosts and liturgical vessels at credence table until placed on altar
- Place hosts on corporal at the edge, i.e. not directly in front of celebrant
- Individual chalices are to be used for deacon and concelebrants only
- The use of Mass servers, if necessary, should be limited
- Hand washing with soap/water or hand sanitizer is required before and after distributing the Eucharist
- Those distributing the Eucharist are to wear masks
- All vessels utilized during Mass are to be washed with hot soapy water immediately after Mass

Parishes not ready or able to meet these requirements should postpone “in Church” public Masses until they are ready or able. The pastor is to make that determination.

Directives for Limited Public Celebration of the Sacraments In Church Until Further Notice

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, confession continues to be available as needed.

Confessionals should not be used.

Outdoor confessions are permitted, even encouraged.

For indoor confessions, a well-ventilated area should be used that would allow for social distancing.

All arrangements for confessions must safeguard the health of both priest and penitent, respecting the dignity and confidentiality of the Sacrament.

Penitents are to observe social distancing if waiting in line.

Masks must be worn by priest and penitent.

In order to decrease the potential spread of COVID-19, penitents may choose to stand or kneel. If a chair or kneeler is provided, it must be sanitized after each use.

Electronic devices of any kind are prohibited.

“Drive-up” confessions are permitted provided they are arranged to facilitate an orderly and proper administration of the Sacrament, observing the norms for social distancing and protecting the confidentiality of the Sacrament.

The confessor may choose to be seated in his own vehicle to which the penitent approaches so that the penitent’s vehicle door comes alongside the confessor’s door.

The Sacrament may only be celebrated with one person in the vehicle.

General absolution is not permitted in the Diocese of Trenton, unless explicitly permitted by the Bishop according to the norms of Canon Law.

THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

The celebration of Baptism within Mass is suspended.

Baptisms outside of Mass are to be celebrated one family at a time.

Consider scheduling baptisms on other days in addition to Sunday.

The number attending should adhere to social distance guidelines with a maximum of 25 persons, as at weekday Mass.

Masks are to be worn by all present.

Only parents or godparents may hold the infant during the ceremonies.

Sanitizer should be used when there is any physical contact before, during or after Baptism

Fresh baptismal water is to be blessed, used and disposed of after each celebration. A “shell” or other implement should be utilized to pour the water in the act of baptizing. Pouring the water by hands alone is prohibited.

The signing of the cross and anointings should be done with a cotton ball or “Q-tip which should be burned or buried afterward.

The anointing with Oil of Catechumens and “*Ephpheta*” may be omitted at the celebrant’s discretion, but touching during “*Ephpheta*” is prohibited

Clothing with baptismal garment options:

- Present garment (in its plastic wrap) it to the parents/godparents who clothe infant while celebrant says, “*N...you have become a new creation...*”
- If celebrant refers to the garment the infant is already wearing, he does not present the garment and says “*N...you have become a new creation...*”

Group photographs in church after the Baptism are not permitted.

The celebrant will not receive or make physical contact with the faithful after the baptism; families should exit church immediately after Baptism in an orderly manner.

THE SACRAMENT OF MATRIMONY

Only the marriage ceremony (not Mass) may be celebrated in church until further notice.

Number of persons in church should be limited to 25, as on a weekday Mass; live-streamed ceremonies may also be offered.

All present must wear masks (except bride and groom).

Social distancing is to be observed throughout the celebration.

Worship aids or other booklets, hymnals, papers and programs are not to be distributed/used in church.

Greeting at the doors is prohibited.

Celebrant will stand at least six feet from the couple, e.g. on the other side of altar.

Wedding rings should be held by the groom only.

The sign of peace and any physical contact between participants, except the bride and groom, is prohibited.

The inclusion of particular or ethnic customs that might jeopardize social distancing should be discouraged but may be determined by the celebrant.

Any receiving line is prohibited; participants should exit the church immediately after the ceremony.

The celebrant should devise a plan for an orderly exit from church, e.g. pew by pew, perhaps using the same plan as at public “in Church” Sunday Masses.

Group photographs in church after the ceremony are prohibited.

Live-streaming of the ceremony is permitted and encouraged.

CATHOLIC FUNERALS IN CHURCH

[MASS IN THE ABSENCE OF THE BODY]

All directives for the celebration of public “in Church” Masses are to be observed

Masks are to be worn and social distancing maintained

No physical contact is permitted in church

The texts for the “Masses for the Dead” are to be used rather than those of the Mass of Christian Burial

[FUNERAL RITES IN THE PRESENCE OF THE BODY]

Vigil for the Deceased

Visitation and vigils in church are prohibited and should be conducted in the funeral home or other appropriate, dignified place

The casket must be closed before the minister begins

Minister and all present must wear a mask and observe social distancing

Holy water to be used (if at all) should be blessed and disposed of properly

Mass of Christian Burial

All directives for the celebration of the public “in Church” Masses are to be observed

Social distancing is to be maintained at all times and masks are to be worn

Number of persons present should follow directives for public “in Church” Masses, preferably 25 but, if necessary, no more than one third of church seating capacity

Physical contact with those attending is prohibited

The use of the pall is suspended

Holy water may be blessed, used and disposed of properly and incense may be used

Live-streaming of the Mass is permitted and encouraged

For the committal, the number of persons in attendance should follow NJ State regulations for cemeteries and physical contact with those in attendance is prohibited

THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

At any health care facility, priests are to follow the health precautions required by the institution for medical staff; priests should sanitize themselves immediately after visit

At the home of the sick: sanitize hands prior to entering house and immediately after visit

Mask must be worn

Whether in health care facility or at the home, a cotton swab or “Q=tip” is to be used for anointing and must be burned or buried after use

Final Remarks

As with the celebration of public “in Church” Masses, parishes not ready or able to meet the preceding requirements for administration of the sacraments should postpone them until they are ready or able. The pastor is to make that determination.

Recognizing that it is impossible to anticipate every question or conceivable parish scenario, priests are directed to use good pastoral judgment and common sense in such situations, while observing these directives.

These preceding directives are temporary and remain in effect until rescinded by the Bishop.

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Approved by:

Most Reverend David M. O’Connell, C.M., J.C.D.,
Bishop of Trenton
May 29, 2020