



DIOCESE OF BUFFALO  
OFFICE OF WORSHIP

## Forward in Faith: Guidance for Returning to Parish Life

Governor Cuomo and other state officials have indicated that the State of New York will reopen on a regional basis, as each region meets necessary criteria based on the need to protect public health. The Diocese of Buffalo encompasses two regional councils — Western New York (including Erie, Niagara, Chautauqua, Cattaraugus, and Allegany counties) and the Finger Lakes (including Genesee, Orleans, and Wyoming counties).

Currently, no counties in the Diocese of Buffalo meet these criteria. However, there is a need to anticipate, dialogue, and prepare for a time when our houses of worship and wider community will reopen to a “new normal.”

The fact that our diocese spans two state-organized regions necessitates that any plans be implemented locally by vicariates and parish leaders, in accordance with all federal, state, and local civil directives. As such, this document provides theological and liturgical guidance in accordance with the norms of the Roman Catholic Church, taking into consideration the needs of the common good and health of the community.

Following the authority of our Apostolic Administrator, Bishop Scharfenberger, as chief liturgist of the diocese, this document includes certain mandates that *must* be followed, along with guidelines and suggestions for solutions that may work in many parishes, recognizing that no single guideline will meet the needs of every parish, and that some items may be adapted based on local need.

While these guidelines seek to define procedures surrounding the Mass, they could be extended to include other, similar public devotions in general. Additional directives specific to sacraments and ministry to the sick and grieving will be forthcoming.

Please contact the Office of Worship for clarification, questions, or assistance with implementation of these policies.

## *Preparing Our Worship Spaces*

It is essential that our parishioners feel welcome in their parish home. As such, we must prepare the space not only so that it is a familiar, comfortable experience, but that we also balance pastoral care with an eye to cleanliness, safety, and the common good.

Can. 223 §1. In exercising their rights, the Christian faithful, both as individuals and gathered together in associations, must take into account the common good of the Church, the rights of others, and their own duties toward others.

§2. In view of the common good, ecclesiastical authority can direct the exercise of rights which are proper to the Christian faithful.

A return to public celebrations will be safe, gradual, and ordered. We will strive for progress, not perfection. There will, no doubt, be challenges and frustrations, and adjustments may need to be made along the way. We must accept reasonable sacrifices to serve our own community, so as not to contribute to a rebound effect of the virus.

- Communication — parishioners must be made aware of each parish's plans for preparation *prior* to reopening and their arrival at the parish campus via whatever means are practical (letter, robocall, email, and /or social media).
- Cleaning Supplies — Each parish should ensure it has adequate supplies for cleaning public spaces, including door handles, pews, etc. However, the faithful should be encouraged to bring disinfectant wipes with them to assist in sanitizing the areas they occupy, particularly in times of individual prayer.
- Appropriate cleaning of high-use areas within the church is to be done before and after each Mass; adjustment of the Mass schedule may be needed to ensure adequate time. (However, a multiplication of Masses will require more cleaning.)
  - Pews utilized by any person must be wiped down with disinfectant.
  - Restroom facilities and door handles, push plates and knobs, are to be sanitized after each Mass.
  - Ambos, microphones and other common areas of the sanctuary should also be attended to in some way.

- Aisles, floors, and seating should be clearly marked to facilitate social distancing of six feet between individuals who do not share the same household.
  - Aisles should be configured for one-way traffic (see liturgical notes).
  - Depending on your liturgical space, you may wish to stagger the pews used. For instance, odd pews could be used on one side of the main aisle, and even on the other.
  - Approximately two unoccupied pews provide enough distance, and staggering where in the pew (left or right) a family sits can assist distancing requirements.
  - The CDC, State of New York and other county health departments can provide the latest requirements, as they may change rapidly as reopening occurs.
  - Capacity may be limited to a specific number or percentage of the available space.
  - Be sure to use methods of sectioning/markings that do not harm finishes on church furnishings.
  
- Hymn books and other resources must be removed from pews and entry ways; they should be sanitized as best they can be and not be returned to the church until the outbreak has passed.
  
- Holy water fonts and stoops should be emptied. They may be covered, but should not be filled with anything else.
  
- Hand sanitizer is to be made available throughout the church when possible.
  
- All liturgical ministers and ushers should wear masks and practice diligent hand-washing and social distancing.
  - Ministers of hospitality should also wear gloves to assist in operating doors, push plates, etc.
  - All staff and volunteers are to be trained in regard to new procedures.
  
- The liturgical environment should reflect the liturgical season, but decorations should be kept to a minimum (fewer surfaces to attract germs).

## *Sunday Obligation*

- Until further notice, Catholics in the Diocese of Buffalo continue to be dispensed from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays, in particular those who are most vulnerable.
- Those Who Are Well:
  - Masses should not specifically be designated for particular groups (i.e. a Mass “for seniors”), but instead, welcome all who are well as best they can.
  - Livestreaming efforts that have developed over the course of the COVID-19 crisis should be continued, especially for those who do not yet feel comfortable attending Mass in public.
  - Those who do not receive Communion are encouraged to make an Act of Spiritual Communion.
- Those Who Are Sick:
  - We care for the Body of Christ by first taking care of our own body. The obligation to participate in Mass is not required for those who are sick. A person who is sick should not worsen their illness by trying to get to church, and they should not put others at risk of catching their illness.
  - It is not sinful to miss Mass if one is sick; it is actually an expression of care for the health of others.

“The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2181

- For those who are seriously ill, the Church wants to celebrate with them the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. This can be arranged by contacting the parish office.
- If one has symptoms of the coronavirus, they should seek medical attention.

## *Entrance and Welcome*

- Each member of the faithful over 2 years of age will be required to wear a mask.
  - Parishes should have a nominal quantity of disposable masks for those who may simply forget to bring their own. Do not distribute the masks for fear that this will be a guarantee of the safety and security of the masks.
  - Celebrants do not have to wear protective covering in the sanctuary (if alone or appropriately distanced from another minister), but should wear a face mask and/or protective shield during communion (see liturgical notes).
- The faithful should be encouraged to take their temperature at home, and to remain at home if they are experiencing symptoms or believe they have been exposed to those with COVID-19.
- Ushers and other ministers of hospitality should be trained and seat people as they arrive, starting in the front of the church and moving toward the back.
  - A similar procedure of dismissal from back to the front should be employed at the end of Mass.
- Volunteers who help to prepare the celebration of Mass must wear gloves in addition to face masks when setting up or putting things away and should sanitize their hands upon entering or leaving the building.

## *Liturgical Changes*

Most changes noted below are *mandated* and *temporary*. Once again, please contact the Office of Worship for clarification, questions or assistance in implementing these changes in your local setting. The goal of these regulations is to maintain the integrity of the liturgy, while addressing the current needs of the wider community in the interest of public health and safety.

- Limits to the Number of People Gathered — In terms of percentage of occupancy to allow in the Church, please follow the guidelines in your community for large gatherings such as theaters.
  - Altar servers are not to participate, and the use of choirs is also temporarily suspended.
  - The inclusion of additional ministers (for instance, a second lector) should be carefully considered, and all should have an assigned place in or near the sanctuary ahead of time, in accordance with distancing rules.

- Alternatives to increase the availability of in-person services could include:
  - Masses celebrated in school gyms or parish centers (if they are significantly larger than the parish church) or livestream to such a space as overflow;
  - Parking lot services via an FM Transmitter or outdoor Masses with appropriate distancing (perhaps people remaining in cars);
  - Live streaming of the Mass to parishioners' homes for those still not yet able to attend.
- Clergy, staff, and volunteers should be careful in logistical planning and training of those facilitating such an experience. Even in these alternative settings, hygiene and safety are paramount.
- All liturgical ministers should model good hygienic practices before, during, and after Mass.
  
- Processions — Entrance processions should follow a “simple form” and not take place among/through the people; the priest alone should proceed from the sacristy to the altar; all other ministers should be in their places ahead of time.
  - As an alternative, the celebrant may also be at the chair and simply stand to begin the Mass.
  - There is to be no offertory procession, as noted above.
    - Bread and Wine for Mass should simply be prepared on a credence table and kept away from public areas.
    - At the appropriate time, hosts for the congregation should be placed on the altar as far as possible from the celebrant, with his own paten and chalice closer for the Eucharistic Prayer.
  
- Music — Congregational singing should be temporarily discontinued, since singing expels more respiratory particles than speaking does.
  - As always, recorded music is prohibited.
  - Soloist cantors and instrumental music should be employed, with no more than one or two cantors and an instrumentalist.
  - Since processions will be shortened, music may be curtailed as well.
  - Musicians must also adhere to social distancing requirements and don masks.
  - Clean the keyboards/instruments, and cantor stand.
  - The use of disposable worship aids for musicians and congregants is highly recommended.

- Liturgical Books and Licensing — Just because a parish owns or subscribes to a hymnal, it does not give the parish the right to reproduce music/materials.
  - As always, observe all copyright laws and contact your publisher regarding licensing.
  - You must have a separate license, which is based on the parish location(s) and average weekly attendance. Some companies offered this gratis until Easter, but some offers have expired. The diocese can not purchase a “one for all” license.
  - This applies to reproduction on paper, electronic screens in the church, mobile devices, as well as streaming services offered by the parish (a podcast/streaming license is required, and some like Facebook and YouTube have the ability to block copyrighted material from being transmitted).
  - Consider using familiar hymns that are in the public domain.
  - Apps like “iBreviary” and “Daily Readings for Catholics” can be useful resources.
  - While the use of mobile devices to access sites like the USCCB during the liturgy may be encouraged for those who would normally use the missalette to follow the readings at Mass, the use of similar devices by lectors, celebrants to *proclaim* the Word of God is strictly prohibited.
  - Celebrants should use the Book of Gospels to avoid contact with the Lectionary, which the lector can remove from the ambo following the Second Reading.
    - Both should be gently sanitized after Mass, taking care not to harm them.

### *Collection*

- One or more large baskets/receptacles may be placed near the altar.
  - Congregants should be encouraged to place their gift in the baskets prior to Mass, as they are being seated, or at another appropriate time determined by the parish.
- Preferably, ushers could use long-handled baskets to collect money from each pew, and consolidate the gifts according to diocesan norms and procedures. Such baskets should be sanitized in between Masses.
- Encourage the use of EFT for offertory gifts.
- There is to be no offertory procession of any kind.

### *The Sign of Peace*

- Whenever the sign of peace is exchanged, it should be done without any touch or shaking of hands.
- Some gestures that might be used are a smile, eye contact, a simple bow of the head, or a wave.

## *Reception of Communion*

- Distribution of Communion apart from the Mass, unless in the case of grave illness or viaticum with the anointing of the sick, is discouraged.
- Communion should be received at the normal time, as part of the Communion Rite at Mass, with the following temporary mandates:
  - The priest / deacon / extraordinary ministers should practice good hygiene before, during and after Mass. All who distribute Holy Communion should discreetly use hand sanitizer (or if possible, wash their hands) before the Communion Procession.
  - If a priest or deacon is a member of a vulnerable group, an extraordinary minister may distribute communion instead.
  - All who distribute Holy Communion *must* wear a mask and / or a face shield for the duration of the Communion Procession.
- The procession should form slowly, with six feet between those awaiting reception of Communion. Floor markings may be helpful closer to the altar (4-5 spaces) and ushers should help to maintain this distance.
  - Parishioners should remain masked until it is time for them to receive, and then return immediately to the mask.
- Distribution of the Precious Blood is suspended.
- As a temporary measure due to the current pandemic, it is highly recommended that Communion is to be distributed in the hand, not on the tongue.
  - For those who do not wish to receive on the hand, spiritual communion remains a valid alternative.
- For proper reception on the hand, appeal to Saint Cyril of Jerusalem:

Approaching, then, do not come with your hands extended or with your fingers open. But make a throne with your left hand for the right, as intending to receive the King, and having made a hollow in your hand, receive the body of Christ, after which you say "Amen."

— *Mystagogical Catecheses*, 5.21

- Ministers and communicants alike must be instructed in this method of reception.
  - The exact hand is not what matters, but that the "throne" must be flat, a secure place to receive Communion.



- Ministers should not place communion in the hand, risking touch, but rather “release” the consecrated host from a few inches above the hand.
- The usual formula is to be used (V. “The Body of Christ” R. “Amen.”)
- The use of gloves (for reception or administration of communion) and/or tongs or other devices is prohibited and does not decrease the risk of contagion. Again, the cleanliness of the minister’s hands is crucial.
- Following communion, any remaining consecrated hosts should be brought back to the altar, placed on it, and consolidated by the deacon or priest. Only one person should repose them in the tabernacle.
  - In keeping with established norms, care should be taken to ensure that an appropriate number of hosts is consecrated for consumption at a particular liturgy and that the tabernacle has a minimal number reserved for the sick.

### *Fellowship*

At this time, fellowship is to be discouraged in all forms, including greeting the people at the doors of the church by the celebrant after Mass. This could encourage gatherings larger than the allowable limit. This may be revised as medical/civil guidance is revised.

### *Leaving the Church*

- As in the beginning of Mass, there should be a simple procession from the sanctuary to the sacristy by the priest alone.
- Celebrants/ministers should not greet people at the door, as this may encourage gathering in close proximity.
- Ushers or other ministers of hospitality that have been trained should assist in the dismissal of the congregation
- After the final blessing, those in the rear of the church should be invited to leave in an orderly fashion and proceed immediately to the exits, one pew/household at a time, with proper spacing until the church has been emptied.
- It is suggested that refuse receptacles be provided at the exits for disposable worship aids, personal protective equipment, or other items that the faithful should not leave behind
- Hand sanitizer should also be available near the exits.
- Bulletins may be printed, but consider a method of delivery that reduces contact.
  - Encourage parishioners to visit the parish website or bulletin company website; consider email distribution lists to send more regular communications.
- All vessels should continue to be purified and then washed in warm, soapy water.
- Vestments, especially those shared among clergy, should be regularly cleaned.

## *Sacrament of Reconciliation*

- The Sacrament of Penance will be made available to people, where possible.
  - Individual confession is the ordinary manner of celebrating the Sacrament.
  - Communal Penance Services are prohibited at this time.
  - General Absolution is *not permitted*.
- As always, the priest should take great care to ensure that the conversation with the penitent remains absolutely confidential.
- A priest can establish an area for confessions in an open area of the church or church hall, or a Reconciliation room with adequate space for distancing.
- A church rectory cannot be used for confessions.
- A priest confessor and the penitent should both wear a mask since by nature confession occurs in a close setting.
- Confessions outside of the church may be offered - penitents remain in their cars with the car window open while the priest hears their confession from a six-foot distance.
- Proper sanitization of any areas or surfaces touched by penitent is necessary after each confession.
- The Sacrament of Penance cannot be celebrated by cell phone, FaceTime, Zoom or any other video conferencing technology. Cell phones and any other electronic devices (with the exception of a hearing aid) should also not be used to amplify the voice of either the confessor or penitent.
- Even though the Sacrament of Penance is available, the faithful are encouraged to follow the directives of the Holy See regarding perfect contrition.

People who cannot get to confession because of the coronavirus lockdown or another serious reason can go to God directly, be specific about their sins, request pardon and experience God's loving forgiveness, Pope Francis said.

"This is the right time, the opportune moment. An act of contrition done well, and our souls will become white like the snow," the pope said March 20 during his livestreamed morning Mass.

— Catholic News Service, March 20, 2020.

- We also call to mind the fact that the Penitential Act at Mass forgives venial sins.