



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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MEMORANDUM

To: All Priests, Pastoral Administrators and Deacons

From: Bishop Salvatore R. Matano, Bishop of Rochester + *Salvatore R. Matano*

Date: May 14, 2020, *Feast of Saint Matthias, Apostle*

Re: **Update on a return to Mass with the faithful present during the Coronavirus pandemic**

As you are aware, in response to the Coronavirus pandemic, the State of New York has implemented *New York Forward*, a 10-region approach to “re-opening” parts of the state after officials make individual assessments of each region according to seven criteria. This plan has four staggered phases, with different businesses and entities listed under each phase. The Finger Lakes Region, Central New York Region and the Southern Tier Region have met all seven criteria and were granted the ability to begin Phase 1 reopening on May 15th, for certain, identified businesses and entities. These three regions together cover the entirety of our diocesan territory. However, to date, churches and houses of worship are not listed under any phase.

Over the past weeks, the Diocese of Rochester, together with the New York State Catholic Conference and other dioceses in the state, has been, and continues to be in conversation with local and state officials seeking assistance and clarification concerning where and when churches and houses of worship are included. Additionally, plans have been submitted showing that all recommended and necessary precautions can be taken for the Sacraments to be offered validly in modified forms for the welfare of our people. It was also made clear that adaptations can only be made to a certain extent lest they detract from the sanctity and transcendent nature of the Church’s Sacraments, especially the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass where bread and wine become the very body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ, our doctrine of transubstantiation. Thus, in following strictly the protocols set forth for the safety of all attending, one must avoid trivializing the Mass or the Church’s rituals, or even calling into question the validity of the Sacraments. We are awaiting a response from civil authorities and will continue to follow-up as necessary.

At this time, many questions remain: the date is not known when Mass will be able to be offered with the faithful present, nor do we know the limitations to be placed

upon the number of people who may be present. We anxiously await this information. However, experience from other parts of the country give us some assistance: initially, we expect attendance to be very small and restricted and, over time, gradually increase. This may be regulated by a fixed number or by a determined percentage of the total capacity. Nonetheless, it is important to consider many aspects in anticipation of that day.

Considerable thought should now be given at the parish level concerning practical and logistical needs for the gradual celebration of Holy Mass with the faithful present for the administration of the Sacraments. This is the primary intent of all parishes. Every other pastoral activity, while important to parish life, should remain limited and remote in order for our parishes first to be able gradually to give our people the opportunity to worship God and have greater access to the Sacraments. **This must remain our primary focus: to celebrate with our people Holy Mass and the Sacraments of the Church with the reverence due to them, particularly the care of the Most Blessed Sacrament, as well as taking all reasonable precautions to preserve the safety and health of the faithful and ordained ministers.** Thus, what we are able to offer our parishioners as we continue to function under restrictions, and what they should expect, will be quite different from that to which they may be accustomed. This reality should be communicated to the parishioners in advance of their return to Mass. Patience and charity toward our neighbors, particularly the vulnerable, will greatly assist in a slow, but well-ordered transition back to Mass with the faithful present.

It must be noted that even with all precautions taken, there still will be a risk for anyone who attends a public gathering to contract the coronavirus. Anyone who is sick should stay home, as should anyone who fears contracting a disease by attending Mass. Parishes should communicate clearly to parishioners who are vulnerable that they should remain at home in accordance with the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC). For this reason, the *obligation* to attend Sunday Mass will remain suspended for all Catholics in the Diocese of Rochester until further notice. Priests themselves must be aware of their own vulnerabilities. They must be aware of the possibility of becoming infected themselves or infecting others. They are obliged to exercise caution and prudence. Age and health may impose further restrictions and modifications at the parish level.

Given the various sizes and configurations of our churches, pastors, administrators, parochial vicars and parish staff will need to give considerable thought to how this information will guide their parish(es). Many of these preparations can occur now, in anticipation of the day Masses with the faithful present may be offered. **When more information is received, the Diocese will provide specific and detailed policies and guidelines to the parishes for the celebration of Mass and the Sacraments, which are already in preparation.**

I. Remote considerations in anticipation of the time we are permitted to have Mass with the faithful present:

- a. Ascertain how best to convey information to your parishioners.
- b. If attendance is limited to a specific number or a percentage of the total occupancy, how will this attendance be regulated? Through a website or app (such as Eventbrite) or by a telephone call? Will this reach all parishioners?
- c. In the event that capacity restrictions are small, parishioners who wish to be present at Mass should be encouraged to consider attending Mass on a day other than Sunday to help spread out the population and afford others the opportunity to also be present as permissible.
- d. If you have multiple churches, choose *one* site that has ample seating, that most facilitates social distancing, is easily accessible, and can easily be cleaned.
- e. Identify the seating capacity of the church.
- f. Review the Mass schedule. Perhaps additional Lord's Day Masses may be needed to accommodate the faithful who can only come in small numbers at a time.
- g. Order ample cleaning supplies now. Research what works effectively but will not harm the surfaces. The Centers for Disease Control provides instruction on reopening and cleaning of public spaces: [CDC Reopening and Cleaning Instructions](#)
- h. Identify what signage will be necessary to instruct the faithful and how it will be displayed.
- i. Parishes must provide some form of sanitizer at the entrance(s) of the church.
- j. Identify persons who will help coordinate entry and exit in the church. Strict physical distancing must be observed at all times, defined as "avoiding close contact with those outside one's household."

II. Disinfecting cleaning must be done before Mass and between Masses:

- a. Develop a process for who will clean between Masses and how they will maintain social distancing.
- b. Determine the minimum number of people needed to clean pews and surfaces.

- c. Estimate how long it will take to properly clean between Masses and schedule Mass times accordingly. Consider spacing Masses further apart, if necessary. This may include refreshing the air within the building through ventilation/circulation, as possible. [CDC Disinfecting Facilities Instructions](#)

III. Physically preparing the church for public celebration of Mass with limited access and reduced numbers:

- a. Check to see which doors could be propped open before Mass so that people do not need to touch doors as they enter.
- b. Cry rooms and nurseries will be closed.
- c. Remove all unnecessary chairs, tables, furniture to limit cleaning.
- d. Close off as much space as possible to limit cleaning.
- e. All missalettes, hymnals, prayer cards, and other paper resources must be removed from pews.
- f. A minimum of using every other pew should be followed. (Every third pew may be necessary.) Intervening pews must be cordoned off to assure six feet in all directions between household groups or individuals.
- g. Holy Water fonts are to be emptied and remain empty.
- h. Baptismal fonts and pools must be emptied and remain empty. Water is to be changed and blessed at each Baptism, according to the ritual.
 - o As always, blessed water is to be properly disposed of in a sacrarium, or directly into the ground.
- i. Those attending Mass must bring and wear their own face masks.
- j. Worship aids may only be distributed in print form if they are single-use for that Mass only and disposed of in receptacles after Mass. Parishes should be aware of copyright regulations. Live-streaming music requires a separate copyright license.
- k. If a parish uses a *Book of Intercessions*, it should be removed until further notice. Provisions should be made for intercessory intentions to be communicated to parish staff by other means.
- l. Special provision should be made for the collection; baskets should not be passed from person to person. Instead, set up central boxes or collection points where the faithful can place their monetary contributions at the entrance(s) of

the church. Parishioners should be instructed and encouraged to give online. Other collections of food, supplies, etc. for charitable giving should be arranged at a day and time outside of Mass and with suitable precautions in place.

IV. Enlisting of volunteers:

Individuals considered part of the “vulnerable population” should not be asked to volunteer to fulfill ministries during this pandemic. All volunteers must freely wish to assist and should not be coerced in any way.

V. Liturgical ministries initially will be considerably limited:

- a. The priest who is the principal celebrant.
- b. One (1) deacon (if necessary).
- c. Concelebrating priests (if necessary).
- d. One (1) lector (the principal celebrant (or deacon) may wish to read all readings and the Gospel).
- e. One (1) musician and one (1) cantor.
 - o (Due to the research that shows singing expels significantly more aerosolized particles of virus than speaking, congregational singing is not feasible; choirs will not be possible during this transitory period).
- f. Ushers/hospitality ministers, as few as needed.
- g. There are to be no altar servers - youth or adult, until further notice.
- h. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should only be assigned where there is genuine need since initially attendance will be limited.
 - o An extraordinary minister of Holy Communion (if a deacon or concelebrant are not present) may only be utilized when the principal celebrant (or a concelebrant or deacon) is unable to distribute Communion himself due to pre-existing health conditions.