

Celebrating Liturgies While Facing COVID-19

Updated: April 28, 2020

Based on the guidance from the Office of the Governor, the celebration of liturgies with the people may resume in the Diocese of Tyler on May 1, 2020, provided that health protocols and other measures are observed in order to protect the vulnerable and mitigate the risk of resurgence in our communities. Taking proper precautions to protect others is a Christian obligation of both justice and charity.

The coronavirus remains a highly contagious disease. We know now that the virus that causes COVID-19 can be spread to others by infected persons who have few or no symptoms. Even if an infected person is only mildly ill, the people they spread it to may become seriously ill or even die, especially if that person is 65 or older with pre-existing health conditions that place them at higher risk. Because of the hidden nature of this threat, everyone should rigorously follow the practices specified in these protocols. The virus that causes COVID-19 is still circulating in our communities. We must continue to observe practices that protect everyone, including those who are most vulnerable.

The pastor of each parish is responsible for ensuring, at a minimum, that the instructions below, as well as guidance from state and local authorities, are observed. Pastors should consult with local health authorities regarding any restrictions or additional measures that may be needed. These protocols cannot anticipate every unique situation. Pastors and those who assist them should stay informed and take actions based on common sense and wise judgment which will protect the health of their communities – Catholic and beyond.

These instructions are subject to revision based on new information, guidance, and experiences. The current version will be posted at dioceseoftyler.org.

Mass Schedule and Dispensation

- The entire diocese remains dispensed from the Sunday and holy day Mass obligation until further notice. The faithful are under **no moral obligation to attend Mass at this time**.
- Before deciding to attend Mass, everyone is asked to consider their own health condition and living situation carefully. **All vulnerable individuals should continue to stay at home**. Members of households with vulnerable residents should be aware that they could carry the virus back home. **People who feel sick or have symptoms of possible COVID-19 MUST remain at home**.

Limitations on Attendance

- The **attendance at all liturgies is limited**. The following requirements must be enforced, and it will require the cooperation and understanding of all:
 - Households must maintain at least a 6-foot separation.
 - Alternate rows between attendees (every other row left empty)

- So that the faithful do not have to be turned away, a fair and charitable system must be developed by parishes to encourage parishioners to attend a specific Mass. For example, it may be necessary to develop a sign-up system, designate Masses alphabetically by last name, or to alternate weekends.
- The pastors are encouraged to work with their dean so that the parishes of a given area may have a common pastoral approach to observing the attendance limitations.

Social Distancing Protocols

- **Households must maintain at least a 6-foot separation in the pews, in the Communion procession, and when arriving for and leaving Mass.**
- Parishes should make only alternating (every other) pews available for seating, and these could be alternated between Masses to limit contamination.
- We ask those who choose to attend Mass to **strongly consider wearing a mask** that covers the mouth and nose.
- Everyone should wash hands or use hand sanitizer before entering the church and after touching common surfaces.
- The Sign of Peace is to be exchanged without physical contact.
- Social gatherings after Mass are not appropriate at this time.

Distribution of Holy Communion

- At the Communion procession, it is recommended that only one pew at a time come forward. Ushers may assist in helping to maintain a 6-foot separation between households.
- Ministers of Holy Communion must wash hands or use hand sanitizer before and after the distribution of Communion. It is strongly recommended that Ministers of Holy Communion wear masks; the bishop encourages the use of masks by priests, deacons, and other ministers.
- At this time, Communion will only be distributed under the form of bread, and it is ***strongly recommended*** that **Communion be received in the hand**. This is necessary because of what we know about how the coronavirus is spread.
- As always, Communion should be distributed with great care. If a Minister of Holy Communion comes into direct physical contact with the communicant, the minister **must immediately stop distributing Communion and wash their hands or use hand sanitizer**.

Health Protocols for Church Buildings

- The pastor must coordinate an effort with parishioners to **disinfect the church after each celebration**. This includes pews, door handles, restrooms, and other common surfaces.

- Efforts should be made to limit the touching of common surfaces like door handles and pews.
- Pastors should make hand sanitizer, disinfecting wipes, soap and water, or similar disinfectant readily available.
- No missalettes or hymnals will be available. One-time-use worship aides are acceptable.
- Holy water fonts and stoups should remain empty.
- Ushers should use gloves during the collection, or alternative collection procedures may be established (collection when arriving, departing, or after Communion).

Accommodations

- In addition to the normal Mass schedule, priests may consider saying additional Masses on Saturday evenings and Sundays to meet the needs of the faithful while the capacity limitations are in place.
- Observing all the above requirements, parishes with multiple priests may also consider offering Mass in other parish facilities at the same time. For example, one priest could celebrate Mass in the church while another celebrates Mass in the parish hall. Technology could also be used.

Other Sacraments and Activities

- All other sacraments should continue to be celebrated in such a way that social distancing and hygiene standards are maintained.
- Parish offices that have been closed may re-open, observing all precautions.
- Faith Formation classes are canceled for the rest of the Spring.
- Small parish meetings may resume if parishes and participants adhere to strict social distancing protocols and hygiene requirements. Facilities must be disinfected after each use.
- Tentatively, the Elect (the unbaptized adults) are to be baptized, confirmed, and receive first Communion at the principal Mass of the parish on the Solemnity of Pentecost (Sunday, May 31, 2020). Additional liturgical guidelines will be provided.
- Tentatively, Candidates for Full Communion (already baptized) are to be confirmed and receive first Communion at the principal Mass of the parish on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity (Sunday, June 7, 2020). Additional liturgical guidelines will be provided.
- At this time, the celebration of Confirmation and first Communion with the bishop is postponed. In the coming months, additional information will be provided about rescheduling these celebrations.

NOTE: Who are Vulnerable Individuals?

1. Those who are 65 or older.
2. Individuals with serious underlying health conditions, including high blood pressure, chronic lung disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and those whose immune system is compromised such as by chemotherapy for cancer and other conditions requiring such therapy.

NOTE: What are the Symptoms of COVID-19?

Persons with any of the symptoms **MUST** remain at home:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Chills
- Repeated shaking with chills
- Muscle pain
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Loss of taste or smell
- Diarrhea
- Feeling feverish or a measured temperature greater than or equal to 100.0 degrees Fahrenheit
- Known close contact with a person who is lab-confirmed to have COVID-19

Persons who have had these symptoms **MUST NOT** come to Mass until: at least 3 days (72 hours) have passed since recovery (resolution of fever without the use of fever-reducing medications); *and* the individual has improvement in respiratory symptoms (e.g., cough, shortness of breath); *and* at least 7 days have passed since symptoms first appeared.