

Protocols for the Reopening of Churches to Public Liturgical Celebrations.

The Diocese of Paterson has been in close communication with State officials, medical professionals, and the other dioceses of the State. We wish to provide the faithful with access to the liturgical life of the Church while maintaining the public health and safety of the faithful and others with whom they may have contact.

These mandated guidelines are general enough to be adapted to diverse parish settings and institutions of the diocese. They are also specific enough to attend to the health and safety of the clergy and faithful as we provide for the spiritual good of our people.

Each parish community or institution will be required to work closely together, involving clergy, staff, and volunteers in order to implement these guidelines and to provide, as much as it is humanly possible, a safe environment proper for Liturgy during this pandemic.

THESE GUIDELINES ARE NOT SUGGESTIONS. THEY ARE, FOR THE MEANTIME, PARTICULAR LAW OF THE DIOCESE OF PATERSON, ESTABLISHED THROUGH THE AUTHORITY OF THE APOSTOLIC ADMINISTRATOR WHO POSSESSES THE AUTHORITY TO PROVIDE FOR THE ORDINARY FUNCTIONING OF THE DIOCESE.

THE GUIDELINES BELOW PERTAIN TO THE APPROPRIATE AND SAFE FUNCTIONING OF ORDINARY LITURGICAL LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH OF PATERSON. THEREFORE, THESE MATTERS REQUIRE ADHERENCE BY ALL PARISHES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES WHERE THE SACRED LITURGY IS CELEBRATED.

General Guidelines

- 1. You will be notified of the date when Churches are to reopen. At that time, public liturgies, including the sacraments, such as Baptism and Matrimony, funerals and Memorial Masses for those who have died during the pandemic may be celebrated.**
2. The dispensation from the obligation to participate in Sunday and Holy Day Masses remains in effect until further notice. For this reason, those who wish to attend Sunday Eucharist and are unable to do so because of the limited access to the church may choose to attend Mass on another day.
3. Those who are particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus, i.e. those sixty (60) years of age and over, and especially those with one or several underlying medical conditions, should follow Mass at home via live stream or television until all restrictions are removed.
4. A person with a cough or fever of any kind should stay home to protect the health of others.
5. Live-streaming of Mass should be continued for those unable to attend.
6. No group for any celebration of the Mass, sacraments, and funerals should be larger than 25% of the total seating capacity within the Church.

7. Churches may be open for private visits outside of scheduled services, but this is left to the discretion of the pastor. The hours should be posted. There should be a plan to properly clean the church and keep it a safe environment after the hours of private visits.
8. Regularly cleaning and disinfecting commonly-touched surfaces in the church is necessary. This should be done after every service in the church.
9. A reasonable period of "empty time" should be scheduled after the time when people leave the church so the entire church can be washed, wiped down, and sanitized. Only then can people be admitted into the next Mass.
10. Pastors should establish and publicize the hours when the parish church and offices will be open. It is advisable to schedule special times at the end of the day when the entire building can be empty and cleaned to the fullest extent needed.

In opening offices it should be kept in mind that provision for supplies of adequate hand sanitizer and masks for both staff and guests should be readily available.

11. Maintenance staff should use the guidelines from the diocese or Center for Disease Control on the best and most practical ways to sanitize their building.
12. All hymnals and missalettes should be removed from the church pews.
13. Hand sanitizers are to be placed at the entrance into the church and in a place easily accessible to the priest presiding at the liturgy.
14. All persons over the age of 2 should wear face masks.
15. Restrooms should only be used in case of necessity. They should be supplied with cleaning materials. Instructions should be posted so that anyone who uses the facility knows exactly what to do.
16. Only one entrance/door should be open for each building. However, all doors should allow for egress in case of emergency.
17. Exits and emergency exits should be tested beforehand and well known to the congregation in case of the need to exit in an emergency.
18. Provision should be made for the handicapped.

Particular Guidelines

1. Mass attendance must be limited to 25% of seating capacity, as noted above. It is left to the discretion of the pastor to determine how this is to be, e.g. first-come, first-served basis, registering on line, lottery etc.

Fr. Marc: "For our parish, the fairest determination is first-come/first-served basis."

Pastors must clearly publicize in advance whatever way they select so that people may understand that, if they arrive after the permitted number has been reached, they may have to be turned away. This is to protect everyone's health and to follow the regulations on health and safety.

2. Volunteers should be available to welcome parishioners to church, maintaining six feet of social distance, directing them toward seating and limiting the number of persons to whom the church is accessible.

Fr. Marc: “The volunteers will be the experienced ushers.”

3. Holy Water fonts and the baptismal fonts are to remain empty. When Baptism is celebrated, small individual bottles of purified water should be blessed and be used for each adult or infant individually.
4. Depending on availability of priests, parishes may schedule more frequent Masses to accommodate their people with smaller congregations.

Fr. Marc: “We’ll have a Sunday evening mass at 7:00pm every weekend. Hopefully, one extra mass each weekend will be sufficient to compliment the ordinary weekend schedule of Saturday (5:30pm), Sunday, (7:30pm, 10:15am and Noon). If after the first weekend of opening we find more masses are needed, we’ll schedule additional masses to the weekend schedule.”

5. All of those attending the Liturgy must wear a face mask. A good number of disposable face masks may be available to the faithful for those who neglect to bring them. The faithful need to be informed of this safety precaution.
6. All people inside the church must practice social distancing by keeping 6 feet from other persons. People in the same household do not have to follow the social distancing guidelines, but must keep 6 feet from those not in their household.
7. Certain pews may be closed to make certain that social distancing is maintained. Temporary and safe markings should be made on the floor or carpet to maintain social distancing as well.
8. Those assisting at the altar should maintain a 6-foot distance from the priest and from each other. The Roman Missal should be placed on a stand before the presider's chair or in the center of the altar. It is not to be held by a server.
9. Altar Servers should not assist at the altar until a later date when the risk of contagion is further ameliorated.
10. There is to be no choir. Singing should be discouraged in general. Singing, especially in close proximity to others, may increase the risk of viral spread.

The parts of the Mass, e.g., Gloria, Gospel Acclamation, etc. must be recited.

11. There is to be no offertory procession. Collection baskets are to be placed in appropriate places to receive the offering of the faithful.

Fr. Marc: “Collection baskets will be placed near the front of the church. Upon arrival or before leaving the church, you may place your donation into it.”

Electronic giving should be encouraged weekly so that the practice becomes more widespread now and permanently into the future.

Ushers should wear gloves when placing the offerings into the plastic security bags mandated through Diocesan Collection Procedures.

12. The Exchange of Peace is to be shared without human contact.
13. Social distancing should be maintained by the faithful when they approach to receive the Eucharist at Communion time. Please allow six feet between each person in the line going to receive the Eucharist. The faithful should be encouraged to bring hand sanitizer to use before the reception of Holy Communion,
14. The Body of Christ should be placed in the hands of the communicant.
15. The distribution of the Precious Blood from the chalice is discontinued for the foreseeable future. The Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ are received under either species.
16. The priest should have a hand sanitizer near him during the distribution of Holy Communion to use as he sees fit. If, per chance, a communicant's saliva comes in contact with the priest, he should immediately stop and use the sanitizer.
17. To avoid crowding at the end of Mass, people may be dismissed by the usher's one pew at a time to avoid crowding.
18. For now, when a priest is approached for celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the confessional is not used. There should be a safe social distance between the priest and penitent in a public and yet appropriate space.

A special note: Priests who have special health considerations and underlying health conditions that predispose them to contracting the coronavirus should seek younger members of the presbyterate to celebrate when possible or approach the Office of Monsignor Mahoney or Monsignor Hart to arrange for the coverage of Masses during this time of pandemic.

These Protocols and Procedures are promulgated for the Diocese of Paterson and effective when churches are opened to the public. They are effective immediately, unless, if, by the content of the particular protocol or procedure, it is clear that it is a protocol which must immediately be implemented. All to the contrary notwithstanding.