

Message from Bishop Stephen Parkes: April 26, 2021

I want to update you on a few items:

Pandemic Protocols

I met with the Vicars Forane recently and we discussed how we will move forward regarding protocols for keeping our communities safe in this next phase of the pandemic. At this point many have received the vaccine and are feeling more comfortable in public situations. This is evidenced by an increase in those who are traveling, dining at restaurants, shopping, etc. Overall, our attendance at Mass is on the rise and we need to continue to make accommodations for those returning to public worship.

The State of Georgia has recently relaxed restrictions in public places with regard to capacity requirements and social distancing measurements. Given the diversity of our Diocese and the varied situations, some parishes have already begun to loosen restrictions. As a local Church we need to maintain a level of consistency as we are called upon to be people of unity and hope. Therefore, beginning Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021 I ask that we all begin to work towards the protocols listed below. I do not suggest that everything happen at once and changes regarding seating and distancing must be announced to the community at least two weeks prior to implementation. It is also important that we inform and train our Ministers of Hospitality (Ushers) regarding any modifications.

If we begin take a phased approach to continued reopening, we will assure our congregations of our concern for them but also help them to move forward. Please note that the Diocese of Savannah Guidelines for Sunday Mass Attendance (issued November 20, 2020 and put into place the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020) are still in effect and allow for those who are uncomfortable in public situations to look to their conscience in being dispensed from the Sunday obligation.

The following protocols may be observed in the Diocese of Savannah beginning Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021:

- Social distancing can be accomplished with 42 inches between households (as per the State of Georgia recommendations for restaurants and movie theaters). It is important that each individual and household take 'personal responsibility' for their decisions and respect of others.
- Tape and ropes marking off pews may be removed as long as social distancing between households is observed.
- The wearing of masks is highly encouraged when inside parish buildings.
- At the discretion of the local Pastor, Holy Water may be re-introduced at the entrance and exits of the church. If Holy Water is present, it should be refreshed on a regular (a few times a week) basis.
- At the discretion of the local Pastor, hymnals may be placed in the pews. It is an individual decision for someone to pick it up and use it.
- Hand sanitizer should be made available at the entrance and exit locations.
- Ushers and Greeters should refrain from shaking hands as people enter the church.
- The Offertory Procession should take place.
- Altar Servers should perform their pre-pandemic responsibilities.
- The collection may be gathered utilizing baskets with extended handles.
- The Sign of Peace should take place with the invitation: *Let us offer one another a gesture of peace* OR a 'simple' *acknowledgement of peace*.
- Those distributing Holy Communion should sanitize their hands before and after distribution. Masks should be worn by those distributing Holy Communion. The faithful should not be denied the ability to receive Holy Communion on the tongue.
- The Precious Blood may not be distributed to the congregation.
- After Mass Fellowship may take place with individually wrapped food items and social distancing protocols observed as noted above.
- As we look to the Fall, we should plan on offering our usual ministries, especially those of Faith Formation and Evangelization. Please work with Staff and Ministry Leaders to plan appropriately for your particular situation.

Please be assured of my prayers for you and those you serve. May we meet each day in our prayers and *Rejoice in the Lord* this Easter Season... and *always!*

In Christ,
Most Rev. Stephen D. Parkes Bishop of Savannah