

STATEMENT FROM BISHOP MARSHALL ON REVISED COVID REGULATIONS

Since the very beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, we have found ourselves in a most confusing and, at times, frightening state. As vaccines appear to be making a difference and as case numbers decrease, we are trying to conform to the regulations from the CDC, the State Fire Marshal, and the Louisiana Governor's Office. As you know, very often these guidelines do not line up perfectly.

As the Church, we find ourselves in a particularly difficult situation. While the Governor has lifted the mask mandate imposed by his office (except in certain situations and among certain professions), every business and organization is left free to require masks or not. Very little information is available on the requirement of social distancing and the necessity to wear masks in any number of venues. In general, ***masks are still highly recommended for all indoor gatherings*** and for any outdoor gathering where social distance is not maintained.

While we are enjoying this apparent waning of the Coronavirus, we cannot stop our vigilance. Though the numbers are lower in our area, there are still those who are contracting the virus. And even if we have been vaccinated, we have been told that we should still take the safety precautions to protect others. The vaccine protects the recipient from getting sick from the virus, not from acquiring it or passing it along.

We look forward to the day when all of us can safely return to Mass. Indeed, in this time leading up to the lifting of the dispensation from the Sunday obligation, we want to invite those who have not felt comfortable coming to Mass to now consider whether they might safely return. Adherence to these protective protocols will give those who are fearful more confidence that we are not just looking out for ourselves, but that we take their health and safety seriously as well.

Among those who must continue to abide by the more rigorous protocols (mask wearing, social distancing, etc.) are all schools and health care institutions within the state. To the extent that the regulations listed below conflict with those imposed by the government on schools and health care institutions, the more stringent regulations will govern our Catholic schools and any health care institution.

Given all of this, after consultation with the Covid-19 Response Team, and except as noted in the paragraph above, I hereby issue the following regulations for the churches and other ministries and entities of the Diocese of Alexandria:

1) Masks are to be worn at any Mass, gathering or Liturgy held indoors. All in attendance at any outdoor gathering or liturgy must wear masks unless social distancing is strictly maintained through restrictions on seating and while waiting in line. Whether indoors or outdoors, social distancing is still required as far as possible, sitting most closely with only those who share your household. Wearing masks and maintaining social distance evidences our commitment to the value of every human life.

2) Receptions and other gatherings at our halls *are allowed*. These gatherings are limited to 75% of the facility's capacity (as determined by the Fire Marshal). Masks should be worn at these gatherings (except, obviously, while eating). Those preparing or serving food must wear masks and employ the use of sanitary gloves. Buffet service is only permitted if social distancing is maintained between patrons while at the buffet.

3) Holy Communion should still be distributed under the species of bread alone. Drinking from common cups is strictly forbidden. Communion in the hand should continue to be encouraged.

4) As long as they wear masks and can be socially distanced for most of the celebration, altar servers could be re-introduced to our Masses in those churches that have stopped using them. No child should be dropped from the long-term server list if he/she or his/her parents do not want them to serve at this time.

5) Dipping hands in a holy water font or vessel continues to be forbidden. The faithful should be able to obtain holy water for private use by filling their vessel from a container in each church. Remember that the Rite of Sprinkling may be a substitute for the Penitential Act at any Sunday Mass.

6) The sign of peace should still be omitted or carried out in a way that avoids physical contact (a wave, a nod, or a bow).

7) Some form of sanitizing the worship space must be employed after each Mass or gathering. There are many sanitization processes that are available, some of which require little time. I invite you to investigate these processes. Sanitizing is

one more visible assurance to those who are afraid that we are welcoming them to a safe space.

8) Hand-washing and sanitization of hands should be a standard practice. Parishes are still to provide hand sanitizers at entrances and exits and other appropriate places.

9) While the dispensation from the Sunday obligation remains in place for the time being, I ask that all use their own judgment and common sense in making their decision about whether or not to attend Mass or other functions. For those who would like to receive Communion, but are too afraid to go to Mass with a large congregation, please consider attending a daily Mass. Social distancing will be easier and the risk of exposure is greatly minimized.

And finally, this dispensation will be lifted at some point in the future. However, no one who is sick, compromised, or caring for someone who is sick should feel the obligation to attend, either now or when the dispensation is lifted. Indeed, whenever you have a communicable disease, you should not attend Mass until you are well.

Thank you to those who have been carefully observing the Coronavirus restrictions over the past year. I ask all to please join me in our continued vigilance to avoid the spread of Covid-19. It has not left us yet and while we are very hopeful, a resurgence of the virus in some form or another is still a possibility. Please prayerfully consider being vaccinated. Let us remember to pray for one another and support our Christian duty to protect life at all stages.

Live Jesus in our hearts,

Most Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr.
Bishop of Alexandria

Members of the Covid-19 Response Team:

Mr. David Brook

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