



## Memo

Date: August 12, 2020  
To: To all parish priests and parishes  
Fr: Bishop Warfel +*BMW*  
Re: Reminder to follow protocols for parish worship

Several months ago, Governor Bullock announced the Phase Two response to the coronavirus. The number of cases had leveled off. Several counties in Eastern Montana had yet to know of a confirmed case of Covid-19. This allowed for a return to public worship and even some parish gatherings. While there was a relaxation of protocols for gathering, it is important to remember that even with a relaxation of restrictions, the need to practice safety when gathering at churches for Mass remains, i.e., six feet physical distancing, the use of masks (when physical distancing is not feasible), and frequent and thorough hand washing and sanitizing. The Phase Two protocols stated that if circumstances did not readily allow for appropriate physical distancing then groups of more than 50 people should be avoided. Obviously, in some of our rural churches, attendance rarely reaches upwards of 50 parishioners and physical distancing is easy to maintain, but only as long as parishioners remember to do so. In the larger churches, there needs to be even more discipline.

When I last wrote to parishes regarding Phase Two Reopening, a number of counties in Eastern Montana had yet to experience a recorded case of Covid-19. I noted that all it would take is for one infected person to spread the virus. Given that some people who are infected remain asymptomatic, they may unwittingly spread the coronavirus for days. There are several counties now that have experienced this reality. For example, Phillips County only recently had no confirmed cases. However, in a period of just over a week, they now report 68 active cases. There are a number of parishes that have had to suspend public Masses in the Diocese due to parishioners being infected as well as one priest.

I have been to a number of parishes and have witnessed mixed practices. It is difficult for some parishioners to fully follow protocols and some, including a few priests, simply refuse to do so. Some parishioners have viewed the matter lightly or just strongly disagree with the need for masks and other protocols, but efforts to heed these requests and obey restrictions remain.

I know personally how difficult it is to maintain proper discipline, but we need to remain vigilant while at the same time not becoming neurotic.

The Governor's updated order (which is simply a matter of taking reasonable precautions) reminds us that face coverings are required in all indoor spaces open to the public or outdoor activities when social distancing is not possible. This applies only to those counties in which there are four or more confirmed cases of Covid-19. Please note that there have been 5000+ confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the State with 80 deaths as of the date of this memo. Not to follow simple protocols is putting the most vulnerable members of the parish at risk. While a particular individual may not want to follow these protocols, I ask that they consider others who may be vulnerable.

Some parishioners have called the need for protocols cowardly and that those who follow them are lacking in faith. In reality, taking such measures is fully in accord with the long-standing practice and teaching of the Church. St. Thomas Aquinas provides helpful insight. To paraphrase his thoughts, avoidance of dangerous conditions is not a sin but rather an act of prudence and wisdom. St. Thomas emphasizes the virtue of fortitude to counterbalance fears while avoiding immoderate daring (Summae Theologiae, Secunda Partes, Q. 123 and 125).

Each parish church in the Diocese is located within its own county with the level of Covid-19 in each county and parish being different. As such, the pastor will need to make determinations how best to implement these directives and do what is best for all his parishioners. I have provided this latitude based on the principle of subsidiarity.

I provided a set of directives made in consultation with the Priests' Council of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billing in June of this year. I cite some, though not all, in this memo as a reminder and to provide renewed guidance for priests and deacons. Given the length of time since the last memo as well as newer conditions that have surfaced, I thought it advisable to provide these as reminders:

**The obligation to attend Sunday Mass and Holy Days continues to be dispensed.** As far as possible, depending on the capability of a parish, live-stream Masses should continue for the benefit of parishioners who are vulnerable individuals or who have underlying health conditions and who will remain at home. Parishioners who are ill should remain at home.

**Parish Masses should continue to be open to parishioners. Some parish gatherings may be allowed but with the restrictions which includes any local governmental determinations:**

- Physical distancing and the wearing of masks, should be encouraged at all parishes and in particular when 50 or more participants gather and in which physical distancing cannot easily be maintained.

- There is to be no procession of the offertory gifts of bread and wine. They are to be brought forward from a credence table located in the sanctuary.
- Deacons and/or servers may be used to provide assistance during the Mass.
- Parishioners are not required to receive Communion but may make a spiritual Communion.
- Distribution of Holy Communion by in the hand is strongly urged out of care and reverence and in all charity for those susceptible to becoming infected. This includes concern for a number of priests in the Diocese who are vulnerable individuals. Communicants who require receiving Holy Communion on the tongue are to wait to receive last.
- The invitation by the celebrant “Peace with you” and the people’s response, “And with your spirit,” should be made, but no further sign of peace among the assembly is to be offered.
- Ministers may wear vinyl gloves while distributing Communion.
- During the celebration of the Mass, the priest is not to wear a mask but should do so when distributing Holy Communion.
- Communion under the Precious Blood is not to be offered until further notice.
- For the Communion procession, communicants are to come up in a single file line, maintaining a distance of six feet from the communicant in front of them. A communicant wearing a mask is to remove the mask prior to receiving the Host.
- Baskets are not to be passed for the collection. They should be located in an accessible and suitable location.
- While a proper cleaning of frequently touched surfaces in the church should be observed, touching surfaces or objects is not thought to be the main way the coronavirus spreads. Hand sanitizers should be available at church entrances.
- Holy water from holy water fonts should remain empty. Baptismal fonts may be filled to provide a visible sign, but only if the font can be roped off to prevent general access.
- Disposable liturgical aids are recommended. If needed, musicians may utilize well known and familiar music that may be sung from memory.
- A particularly vulnerable priest may choose to celebrate Mass but allow others to distribute Communion.
- Communion to the home bound is discouraged except in cases of severe illness and when anointing of the sick should also take place. General requests from parishioners to receive Communion at their home is not allowed.
- If possible, churches are to remain open for parishioners to pray. Adoration and Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction are encouraged; exposition is not allowed unless someone is present.
- Public celebrations of the Sacraments are permitted keeping in mind the need for physical distancing. When in close proximity, however, e.g., a baptism, a mask should be worn.

- Baptism of infants may be celebrated. New water is to be used and blessed for each baptism.
- Confirmation with first Communion celebrations are to be scheduled according to the pastor's determination. Requirements for physical distancing and hygiene must be followed.
- Weddings may be celebrated with the limitations stated above. Weddings may be celebrated out of doors (as a temporary relaxation of policy).
- Opportunities for the Sacrament of Penance must be maintained while assuring proper physical spacing and strict confidentiality.
- Funerals may be celebrated with the limitations previously stated.
- Anointing of the Sick is to be available especially for those who are in proximate danger of death and request anointing and viaticum. The directions, procedures and policies of all medical and care facilities must be strictly followed when visiting the ill. The use of an instrument, such as a vinyl glove is allowed and may be used for the anointing of a person who has Covid-19. Please check with your County Health Department regarding the need to self-quarantine and inform the Bishop.
- Clergy are encouraged to adopt reasonable and prudent measures to ensure everyone's safety, including their own. All are encouraged to continue to practice good hygiene and appropriate physical distancing. Parish staff and parishioners who are sick should remain at home as should vulnerable and at-risk populations.