



MEMORANDUM

Date: January 25, 2021
To: All Priests and Deacons
Fr: Bishop Warfel +BMW
Re: Covid-19 Directives update

Not much has changed since the State of Montana moved to the *Phase Two protocols* except that a vaccine is now beginning ever so slowly to be provided to residents of the State. That people are still becoming infected, however, requires that protocols need to be continued. The new variant that is slowly spreading evidently is twice as contagious as the other strain. So, as a reminder, the current practice for the wearing of masks at Mass, especially if circumstances do not readily allow for appropriate physical distancing, is to be maintained. I realize that there is strong resistance in some quarters. I also realize that, in some cases due to afflictions such as COPD, etc., a person may not be able to wear a mask. However, masks are to be worn at Mass and physical distancing practiced except for families.

I have been to a number of parishes and missions since the last memo on these restrictions. Some parishes have followed them closely which in others it appears as if they have never heard of the need of restrictions. Granted, local conditions reveal that a one size fits all doesn't make a lot of sense, but at the same time, I have experienced incredible laxity in some parishes.

I have reviewed our present protocols and have received comment from members of the Priests' Council. The following is an update:

The obligation to attend Sunday Mass and Holy Days continues to be dispensed.

The obligation to receive Holy Communion during the Easter season (Easter Duty) and to receive the Sacrament of Penance this year is dispensed. Parishioners should be encouraged to make a good confession as soon as they judge it feasible. The basic requirement of the Church is for all Catholics to "confess...grave sins at least once a year." It is not essential that this take place during Lent or Easter. While the 'Easter duty' to receive the Eucharist should be done within

the Easter season, the Code of Canon Law specifies that ‘for a just cause’ this obligation can be fulfilled ‘at another time during the year.

Parish Masses should continue to be open to parishioners. Some parish gatherings may be allowed such as a pastoral council meeting but with restrictions which includes any local governmental determinations:

Physical distancing and the wearing of masks should be encouraged. Each church is to have a sign posted noting that masks are to be worn at Mass and as meetings and physical distancing practiced. However, do not ask people to leave or refuse them entrance if they refuse to wear a mask. Simply offer them the mask and ask that they wear it for the benefit of others. Each church is to have masks available at the entrance as well as sanitizers. Parishes may need the assistance of hospitality ministers to help manage and assist parishioners to follow protocols:

- 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. The priest has a right to refuse assistance at the altar from someone refusing to wear a mask.
- Distribution of Holy Communion 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 not to be denied. The priest may wash or sanitize his hands before offering the Eucharist to the next communicant unless there is a group of communicants from one family.
- The invitation by the celebrant “Peace be with you” and the people’s response, “And with your spirit,” should be made, but no further physical sign of peace among the assembly is to be offered.
- Priests or other ministers are not to wear vinyl gloves while distributing Communion.
- During the celebration of the Mass, when presiding at the altar, the priest should not wear a mask but may wear a clear face shield of some sort. The mask is to be worn when distributing Holy Communion.
- Communion under the Precious Blood is not to be offered until further notice. In cases of concelebration, if the number is two or three, several chalices may be used though intinction of the Host is preferred.
- 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. If the communicant is wearing a mask, he/she is to remove the mask prior to reception of Holy Communion.
- Baskets are not to be passed for the collection. They should be located in an accessible and suitable location.
- Proper cleaning of frequently touched surfaces in the church should be observed.

- Parish meetings may take place, such as, a parish council, Bible study class, a prayer group, etc. for under 50 people while using masks and adhering to proper physical distancing.
- Holy water from holy water fonts or baptismal fonts generally should not be filled except in cases in which there is a sterilizing element, or a barrier is placed around the font.
- Disposable liturgical aids are recommended. If needed, musicians may utilize well known and familiar music that may be sung from memory.

In order to provide an additional opportunity for parishioners to attend Mass and to receive the Eucharist, parishioners should be alerted to the possibility of attending a weekday Mass. It is helpful for the parish to provide an early morning or an evening opportunity for Mass.

For a situation in which a priest is particularly vulnerable, he may choose to celebrate the Mass but allow others to distribute Communion.

Communion to the home bound has inherent risks to vulnerable individuals. At this time, regular visits to the home bound is discouraged except in cases of severe illness when anointing should also take place. General requests from parishioners to receive Communion at their home is not allowed. A parish priest may commission a parishioner to take communion to homebound family members or parish members who have no family. Clergy and lay staff should strive to make regular and personal contact, by phone and other electronic communication to those who are homebound. This also includes those in nursing facilities and assisted care living situations, some that do not allow visitation.

If possible, churches are to remain open for parishioners to pray. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is encouraged. Ideally, parishes should provide time and opportunity for Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction; social distancing must be managed and maintained. 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. (See January memo to clergy.) Requirements for physical distancing and hygiene must be followed.
- Adult initiations may be celebrated.
- Weddings may be celebrated with the protocols stated above. *Weddings may be celebrated out of doors (as a temporary relaxation of policy) but must follow the restrictions noted in the memo attached.

- Opportunity for the Sacrament of Penance should be maintained while assuring proper spacing and strict confidentiality. During Lent, communal penance services are discouraged.
- Funerals may be celebrated with the limitations stated above.
- Anointing of the Sick is to be available, especially to respond to 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 glove or cotton swab is allowed and may be used for the anointing of a person who has COVID-19. If such a case surfaces, please check with your County Health Department with regard to 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 and use of masks. Parish staffs and parishioners who are sick should remain at home as should vulnerable and at-risk populations.

*According to diocesan policy (actually particular law), the normative location for the celebration of a wedding involving a Catholic is in their proper parish church. In the past couple of years, I have allowed a few exceptions to this policy due to some unique circumstances. I was asked at one of the recent Vicariate meetings if this policy could be relaxed given the coronavirus and given that an individual is far less likely to contract the virus out-of-doors rather than in an enclosed space such as a church. After giving some thought and reflection to this, I am going to relax this requirement **temporarily** but only if certain conditions, **according to the existing protocols**, can be met. If such a request is granted, it is essential that the wedding retain the Catholic nature of matrimony as understood by the Church through its teaching and belief.

- During the phased approach for Reopening the Big Sky (phase one and two), a Catholic wedding may be celebrated at an appropriate outdoor location. A description for the location must be provided.
- Given the real possibility of inclement weather, some kind of over-head covering is to be available as an alternative if not used for the wedding itself, e.g., a large commercial canopy tent or an outdoor pavilion. An alternate in door facility is not allowed.
- Final determination of the appropriateness of a location rests with the Bishop. Permission to proceed is reserved to him.
- No priest/deacon is required to officiate a wedding in a location outside of his assigned parish church.
- The ritual to be used is the Order of Celebrating Matrimony without Mass.

Procedure to obtain Permission:

- The priest/deacon who will officiate or the parish priest/administrator must request permission in writing to the Bishop. The request must include:
 - A letter from the couple making the request and providing the reasons for the request;
 - A letter from the pastor, outlining the reasons for the request and his consent to it;
 - In the case the pastor is not the officiant, a letter from the priest/deacon who will officiate, outlining the pastoral reasons for the request and his consent to it;
 - An assurance from the priest/deacon who will officiate at the wedding that quality marriage preparation is being provided and attesting that the couple understands and embraces the religious dimension of matrimony and is actively practicing their faith;
 - If the wedding is to take place in a location other than within the pastor's parish, a letter of concurrence must be obtained from the pastor of the parish in which the proposed wedding is to take place and his permission/delegation for the wedding to take place within that parish's boundaries (required for validity).
- Permission will be granted or denied in writing.