

1 December 2020

## **COVID-19 UPDATE FROM BISHOP FABBRO (Update #13)**

This update is based on recently issued government regulations and on my consultation with the Episcopal Council which brought forward several questions and issues from the deaneries.

### **1. Extension of the Dispensation from the Sunday Obligation**

As announced by my office on 6 November 2020, the dispensation from the Sunday obligation is extended to, and includes, Easter Sunday. It also includes the solemnities of the Nativity of the Lord (25 December) and Mary, Mother of God on the octave day of Christmas (1 January).

### **2. Use of Facial Masks**

Masks are now required by provincial law in all public buildings, which includes churches. The exemption remains in place for those who have a medical condition and for children under the age of two years. Those who refuse to wear masks without a proper exemption can be turned away at the door of the church, for the sake of the health and safety of all who gather in our churches. Pastors/administrators of parishes are obliged to enforce this directive.

If certain people persist in not wearing masks, they should be informed by registered or "express" mail that they will not be allowed into the church should they present themselves again. It may be helpful to inform such people that their names will be made known to greeters at all Masses, so that their presence will be monitored. The greeters then need to be informed. This directive applies equally to those who remove masks once they are in their seats. After a polite request and refusal, they should be served with notice by mail.

### **3. Persons with Exemptions from Wearing Masks**

Those seeking an exemption from wearing a mask in our churches must bring their pastor, prior to 1 January 2021, evidence from their physician, nurse practitioner, social worker, psychologist or occupational/respiratory/physical therapist attesting to their condition. When they register for Mass, they should alert the parish team that the pastor has granted them an exemption, so that they can be seated in a designated area. They should wear a mask but only to enter and exit the church unless a documented disability prevents them from doing so even briefly. Parishes should make arrangements to take Communion to those with a mask exemption in their seats, so their movement in the church is minimized. They must wear a mask for the brief period of receiving Communion when approached by the minister unless their disability prevents them. Where there is strict impossibility to wear a mask, arrangements for Communion should be made with the pastor so that a safe means of distribution can be ensured. Those with an exemption must always maintain social distancing.

This new protocol does go beyond the requirements in most health unit orders and local by-laws, but they are required to protect the safety of our parishioners, parish teams and volunteers while on church property. Infections continue to increase in our communities and small sacrifices like wearing a mask can slow the transmission of the virus, and are a sign of our love for our neighbours and help prevent people from taking advantage of the exemptions for personal reasons.

### **4. Protocol for Reporting Positive Cases of COVID-19 in the Diocese**

With the advent of two positive cases of the virus among diocesan people, a new "COVID-19 Protocol for Reporting Positive Cases in Parishes" has been developed. It relies heavily on cooperation with local health authorities.

### **5. The Reception of Holy Communion**

With the restriction of receiving Holy Communion only in the hand, some of the faithful are presenting themselves with pyxes in the Communion procession with the hope that a Host will be placed in the pyx for them, so that they can receive the Eucharist without touching it with their hands. In the Roman

ritual, self-communicating is reserved only to priests and bishops. The faithful may not present themselves for Holy Communion with the intention of receiving the Eucharist from a pyx, a small cloth, gloves, or anything other than their bare hand. Therefore, this practice must stop where it has happened, and the faithful need to be catechized about due reverence when receiving the Eucharist.

The restriction of receiving Communion only in the hand is disturbing to many of the faithful. We need to show them patience and kindness and provide good catechesis, assuring them that the traditional practice of the option of receiving on the tongue will be restored as soon as the public health situation allows. To this end, Father Béchar, Director of Liturgy, has prepared a statement on the proper means of receiving the Eucharist during the pandemic.

To avoid confusion, pastors/administrators are reminded that those taking Communion to the homebound are not to bring their pyx in the Communion procession when receiving the Eucharist for themselves. Instead, they are to present themselves before Mass. The pyx they will use to take Communion to the homebound is to be prepared with altar bread(s) and placed on the credence table before Mass. The pyxes will then be placed on the altar when it is prepared in the usual manner at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The pyxes are presented to these ministers following the Prayer after Communion. (See Directives, 17 June 2020.)

## **6. Best Practices for Hearing Confessions during the Pandemic**

Several good ideas were offered for hearing Confessions during the pandemic. These are given only as suggestions for this difficult situation, and will need to be adapted for local circumstances. The “core ideas”, as outlined in the Directives of 17 June 2020, remain as specifics that must be followed: social distancing must be maintained while waiting to celebrate the sacrament and during the celebration; and both priest and penitent must wear a mask.

- a) Confessions are heard in the community centre or meeting room. A table and chairs can be set up, with plexiglass down the middle of the table. There is a pre-dieu on the penitent’s side of the table, giving the opportunity to kneel. Pieces of paper and pens/pencils are there for the penitent to write his/her name and phone number, which is then given to the priest for contact-tracing purposes. The names will be sealed in an envelope and opened by the parish only if needed to trace possible exposure to a positive case. The station is sanitized when the penitent leaves.
- b) Large confessional rooms may allow enough space for physical distance within the room. A plexiglass shield is strongly recommended as well.
- c) When there are open times for Confession, people are invited to the front of the church where they can stand two metres (six feet) from the priest. They remain standing during the Confession. They leave by a different doorway. Other penitents wait at the back of the church until invited forward. There is nothing to be sanitized with this method.
- d) Confessions are heard only by appointment in an open area of the church, with proper distancing. If a chair is used, it is sanitized when the penitent leaves.

## **7. Cleaning Pews after Masses and other Celebrations in Churches**

The ACBO has learned that it is no longer necessary to clean entire pews. After each Mass or celebration, it is now required to clean only the frequently touched surfaces of pews, that is, the tops and sides of each pew where people normally rest their hands, if the pew is scheduled to be used within an hour of last occupancy. Disinfection should consist of running a disinfectant-laden cloth along the tops and sides of each pew. If a pew will not be used within an hour of the last occupancy, there should be no need to disinfect it. The entire backs and seats need not be cleaned after each Mass as before. Weekly cleaning of all surfaces (seats, backs, tops, kneelers), however, must still be done.

## **8. Pastoral Care of Catholic Schools**

In consultation with our local school boards, our Pastoral Services office has revised and released its document “Working with Our Catholic Schools during COVID-19”. There are four specific areas that have been altered:

- a) Parishes are not to offer livestreamed or recorded Masses for classes or schools. Class visits to churches for Masses, Liturgies of the Word or devotional prayers may happen under the following conditions: the visits are initiated by the school with school board permission. School personnel should obtain parental consent, work with the local pastor, and ensure that all rules regarding hand sanitizing, physical distancing, maximum capacity and masks are followed.
- b) Pastors may make the celebration of the Eucharist available in the church or school chapel to trustees, teachers and staff on special occasions, e.g., an annual Board event such as the Inauguration of a Board; or a Staff Faith Day.
- c) Every board has a “virtual school”, and these schools may be looking for pastoral outreach. Since they are not limited to any boundaries, these schools do not belong to any one parish. Pastoral teams which are contacted by a virtual school may provide pastoral care to these students and educators.
- d) Confusion by some as to what constitutes a Liturgy of the Word or devotional prayers prompted a need for some clarification. Father Michael Béchar, Director of Liturgy, has prepared a simple guide in conjunction with the Pastoral Services office. The guide is found within the revised document.

Further details regarding these changes are highlighted in red in the revised version of “Working with Our Catholic Schools during COVID-19”.

## **9. Further Restrictions on Occupancy**

While the areas of our Diocese remain in green, yellow, orange or red zones, as defined by the provincial government, there is no anticipation of greater restrictions of numbers of people allowed in our churches and halls. We remain at 30% capacity with physical distancing of two metres (six feet). If the pandemic worsens, local restrictions could reduce our capacity further in the areas covered by those mandates.

Our parishioners are expressing their gratitude for all the work that makes it possible to worship in a safe manner.

## **10. Municipal Inspections**

The ACBO advises that the Government of Ontario is mandating random inspections by municipal authorities. All pastors/administrators must be vigilant to maintain safe environments according to the diocesan protocols, and provincial and local laws. They have a responsibility to ensure that these provisions are put into practice in our parishes. Failure to comply could lead to prosecution and to the closure of specific churches or all churches in our diocese or province.

Most Rev. Ronald P. Fabbro, C.S.B.  
Bishop of London

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