

The Flu and the Liturgy

Each year, with the arrival of the flu season, your pastor is concerned with limiting the transmission of pathogens, particularly at Mass. These questions and answers have been developed by the Office for Worship of the Diocese of Worcester and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Additional information on influenza outbreaks is available from www.CDC.gov/flu.

1. What is influenza (also called “the flu”)?

The flu is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses that infect the nose, throat, and lungs. It can cause mild to severe illness, and at times can lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccine each year.

2. How flu spreads

Most experts believe that flu viruses spread mainly by droplets made when people with flu cough, sneeze or talk. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby. Less often, a person might also get flu by touching a surface or object that has flu virus on it and then touching their own mouth, eyes or nose.

3. Period of contagiousness

You may be able to pass on the flu to someone else before you know you are sick, as well as while you are sick. Most healthy adults may be able to infect others from 1 day before symptoms develop and up to 5 to 7 days after becoming sick. Some people, especially young children and people with weakened immune systems, might be able to infect others for a longer time.

4. Preventing seasonal flu: Get vaccinated

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get a flu vaccine each season... About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies develop that protect against influenza virus infection. Flu vaccines will not protect against flu-like illnesses caused by non-influenza viruses. The seasonal flu vaccine protects against the three influenza viruses that research suggests will be most common.

5. If I am sick with the flu, am I obliged to go to Mass?

No. Those who are seriously ill or contagious with the flu should stay at home, lest they pass the flu on to others. Such an illness is a legitimate reason to miss Mass and they are not under an obligation to attend.



6. What else should individuals keep in mind?

Individuals who are feeling unwell or believe they may be ill with diseases which are communicable, such as a cold or the flu, are well advised to refrain from receiving the Precious Blood as their saliva could transmit the pathogen to their fellow communicants. In such circumstances, communicants should carefully consider receiving Holy Communion under the form of bread alone. Those who are not feeling well should refrain from receiving from the chalice, and should receive Holy Communion under the form of bread alone to avoid transmitting any illness.

7. What about the distribution of Communion under both kinds?

Holy Communion distributed under both the species of bread and wine is recommended by the Roman Missal as

“a more complete form as a sign” (GIRM no. 281). When considering the distribution of Holy Communion, however, it should also be borne in mind that even when Holy Communion is distributed under the form of bread alone, the communicant

still receives the Lord entirely, in his Body, Blood, soul and divinity. There are, indeed, circumstances when Communion under both kinds is not the best choice.

8. What could Pastors do?

Pastors should remind all ministers of Holy Communion, ordinary and extraordinary, to practice good hygiene, washing their hands before Mass begins. The use of alcohol-based anti-bacterial solutions before and after the distribution of Holy Communion has also been recommended. During a particularly virulent outbreak of influenza, the pastor might choose to suspend the exchange of peace¹ or suspend the distribution of Holy Communion under both kinds until the outbreak has abated.

¹ A major means of transmission of the flu and colds is by hand. Either by sneezing or coughing upon our hands, or even touching a surface which has been contaminated by the saliva of others pathogens can be passed to others, especially by shaking their hands (with which they subsequently touch their eyes or mouth, etc.).

All are urged, in their charity, to keep the sick in their prayers and to use common sense, especially during the cold and flu season.