



Diocese of Ogdensburg

Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley

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October 2, 2020
The Holy Guardian Angels

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We are all keenly aware of the havoc and high anxiety caused by the COVID-19 emergency. We have seen suffering and isolation on a scale that we never imagined. We have all been adversely affected by the virus and by the measures implemented to limit its spread. I am writing to you to review and to give you an update on our efforts to continue our sacred mission during the pandemic.

In March, it was necessary to dispense the obligation of Sunday Mass and to discontinue public worship. Our pastors and parish staff members found, and continue to provide, creative ways to maintain contact with parishioners and to make Mass available on television or the Internet. While these efforts to touch the lives of the faithful are of great value, they are not the same as attending Sunday Mass. No broadcast is comparable to personal participation or can replace it. If we are not careful, these broadcasts risk distancing us from a personal and intimate encounter with God who has made Himself present to us in a real, not virtual, way.

It was with great joy and relief that I was able to authorize the resumption of public worship in late May. Working with local public health officials and medical professionals, we were able to safely allow in-person celebration of Mass, while implementing protocols to limit the spread of the virus and keep everyone safe. I thank all of you for your continuing cooperation in following those protocols.

Like you, I have been monitoring the data and guidance that is available, hoping for a relaxation of restrictions that will allow for increased access to the sacraments for all the faithful. Thus far, the data suggests that a widespread relaxation of protocols and a full return to normalcy are not yet possible. The most recent guidance from the Thomistic Institute and the Department of Health indicates that we must continue the safe physical distancing practices that limit the number of persons who may attend Mass, as well as hand sanitizing, disinfecting after liturgies, and the wearing of facial protection. I therefore encourage all our clergy, consecrated religious, and parishioners to continue to follow diligently the protocols set forth in my May 23, 2020 decree for Partial Opening of Churches and Public Worship coupled with the revisions I list below. Our efforts to mitigate the virus and protect ourselves are prudent. The possibility of a national and local resurgence requires that we remain vigilant.

Nonetheless, there is also much reason for hope! Data indicate that the mortality rate of the virus is much lower than was once feared, and that the most severe effects of the virus have been experienced by a low percentage of those who were infected. Accordingly, I have been prayerfully considering ways to provide greater access to the sacraments and other spiritual, educational, pastoral, and liturgical celebrations in our parishes, while still safeguarding that portion of the population which is most vulnerable. I am particularly aware of the need for greater participation in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The

partial re-opening permitted by the civic authorities has already allowed many people to return to the dignity of work and resume, to some extent, their social and communal obligations. ***Eucharistic celebrations are essential for our happiness, health, and, most importantly, for our sanctification.*** Our faith tells us that the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day with the Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life (CCC, #2179).

Every Catholic Christian is obliged to keep the Lord's Day holy and to attend Sunday Mass. That being said, the Church has always recognized circumstances in which the faithful may be excused from Mass attendance even without a dispensation from the Bishop. Clear examples here would be those who currently suffer from an underlying health condition; those who are at increased risk for severe illness (i.e. the elderly); and those responsible for their care. If you are uneasy about returning to Mass for reasons of public health, I encourage you to make your decision after much prayer and study. If safe distancing in your parish is problematic, perhaps attending Mass at a different time than you usually do or attending Mass at a nearby parish might work better.

Those who do not attend Mass for the reasons stated above should continue to mark the Lord's Day by substituting another pious exercise in its place. This might include watching Mass on television or on the Internet, praying the rosary, Eucharistic adoration, private prayer at church, praying novena prayers or other devotional prayers, or reading Scripture. A person may also consider attending daily Mass, where the number of attendees is less than on Sunday.

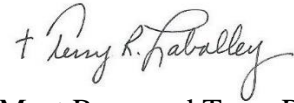
As a diocese, we will continue to adhere diligently to physical distancing, hygiene practices, wearing facial protection, and sanitizing our worship sites. I ask for your continued vigilance, patience and cooperation. The following revisions are offered to our current protocols for the celebration of Mass:

1. For those whose conditions during this crisis dictate absence from Mass, the pious exercises offered earlier (or similar ones) should be practiced.
2. Government limitations on the size of Mass congregations (currently 50% of church building occupancy while accounting for physical distancing) and for public gatherings for other activities (currently 50 persons) will continue to be observed.
3. Protocols for hand sanitizing, cleaning churches, and wearing facial protection will continue to be observed.
4. Parishes that do not do so already should consider preparing single-use worship aids with music, readings and prayers to facilitate participation at Mass.
5. I encourage all parishes to move to the distribution of Holy Communion during Mass, rather than at the end.
6. I encourage all parishes to the restoration of simple entrance and recessional processions, if they are not currently employed.
7. Ushers may use long handled baskets to take up the offertory collection, while still observing guidelines for facial protection and physical distancing, as much as possible.
8. All other protocols remain in effect.

We will continue to monitor the data and guideline updates provided by the government. We will make changes to our protocols as we are able. I am so grateful to all our parishioners who are assisting their parishes in their efforts to provide a safe worship space.

Please know of my prayers for you and your families. Let us continue to pray for the powerful intercession of our Blessed Mother and St. Joseph for an end to this virus and for the health and safety of one another.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Terry R. LaValley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley
Bishop of Ogdensburg

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