



9 August 2021

COVID-19 UPDATE FROM BISHOP FABBRO (UPDATE #20)

Last week, the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario issued an addendum to their document *WorshipSafe*, originally published in June of 2020. I brought the changes to the Episcopal Council for discussion and recommendations for implementation. *WorshipSafe*, as you may recall, was written by a committee comprising, among others, an epidemiologist, legal advisors, insurance advisors, liturgical experts, and various diocesan officials from across the province. It is based on directives of the Government of Ontario, and published with the committee's approval.

The recent addendum was written "in light of the increasing rate of vaccinations, relaxed provincial anti-COVID restrictions and greater scientific knowledge concerning COVID-19" with a view to "safely reduce the necessity for full pandemic safety measures". It cannot be stated enough, though, that the protocols issued earlier, unless otherwise changed herein, remain in effect. To keep people safe, we must be responsible to follow all the protocols that we have been given. This is no time for self-interpretation or premature relaxation.

The Importance of Getting Vaccinated

Getting vaccinated is a matter of personal choice, but we need to pay attention to the directives and instruction of health officials. In matters of conscience, we are morally obligated to do our best to inform our conscience well based on the Church's teaching.

On 21 December 2020, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), in an instruction approved by Pope Francis, addressed the matter of the morality of the vaccination. People might be exempt from getting vaccinated on medical or religious grounds. Some may say that they cannot take the vaccine because fetal tissues were used in the development or testing of the vaccines.

CDF made it clear that "religious grounds" are not a reason to forego the vaccine. The Congregation, and the Holy Father on various occasions, emphasized, instead, the value of the vaccine to help stop the spread of the virus and the pandemic itself. They appeal to the faithful to take action for the sake of the common good. "The morality of the vaccination", the statement of CDF reads, "depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good."

The complete statement on vaccination against the COVID-19 virus is found at this [link](#).

Aerosol Transmission

WorshipSafe emphasizes the growing understanding of COVID-19 and its spread by means of aerosol transmission, that is, by breath and by microscopic dehydrated particles of droplets that float in the air from people breathing and speaking. For this reason, three things are important as the most effective ways of preventing aerosol transmission:

1. continue wearing masks;
2. ventilate the air in buildings frequently as effectively as possible; and
3. maintain reduced numbers of people in contained spaces through physical distancing.

Therefore, *no changes are to be made to the setup in our churches, since physical distance remains mandatory*. Though the provincial government lifted the “percentage” capacity, all are still bound by physical distancing, which means in effect, no increase in numbers in our congregations.

With relaxed restrictions, the following changes may be implemented immediately:

1. Changes that Affect our Church Spaces

- a) Cleaning procedures may return to pre-COVID times. Proper cleaning is still important, but may be done only on a weekly basis, instead of after each gathering in our churches.
- b) Consider how the interior space can be well ventilated.
 - Air conditioning systems should have the fans set “on” before, during and after (at least for a brief time) the church is being used.
 - Where possible, prop open doors and windows to allow airflow.
 - Floor fans may be helpful where air conditioning is not found, directed away from people, so as not to carry aerosol from one person to another.
 - Rebalance HVAC systems to increase total airflow to occupied spaces, for example, by closing vents in rooms not used so more air flows to those rooms that are used.
 - Adjust HVAC systems to introduce outside air as much as possible.
- c) Hymnals, missals, and prayer books may be placed in the pews once again. *The restriction on singing continues as before, until further notice.*
- d) Bulletins, pamphlets, newspapers may be distributed at the doors.
- e) Religious articles may be sold, mindful of necessary distancing.
- f) Votive candles may be made available for the faithful to light.
- g) Crying rooms and chapels may be used, with distancing restrictions.

2. Changes that Affect our Celebrations

- a) When people arrive for Mass and other celebrations, hand sanitizing and screening are no longer needed. People are expected to do self-screening before coming to church, and the signs for self-screening should remain in place. Hand sanitizer should be available at entrances for those who wish to use it. *Contact tracing is still required.*
- b) Entrance and recessional processions may be restored with physical distancing and all wearing masks. A server, a deacon, and the presider may be included.
 - Servers will carry a Cross in the processions, but not act in any other capacity during the liturgy.
 - Deacons will carry the *Book of the Gospels* in the entrance procession, and place it on the altar as according to the rubrics. If there is no deacon present, the *Book of the Gospels* is placed on the altar before the Mass begins.
 - Lectors are not part of the processions; they take their places in the congregation.
- c) Deacons, in addition to proclaiming the gospel and other speaking parts (e.g., the Universal Prayer, the sign of peace, the dismissal), may prepare the altar. They may hold the chalice for the doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer.
- d) Collections may be taken up only where a parish has long-handled baskets. Even in these cases, parishes may continue to collect the offerings at the door of the church. Baskets shall not be passed down the pews.
- e) *Procedures for the reception of Holy Communion are unchanged.*

3. The Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance

- a) Where possible, continue to celebrate the sacrament of Penance in large confessional rooms or outside of confessionals to allow physical distancing. Where necessary, confessionals may be used, but both priest and penitent must be masked.
- b) Pastors of souls are encouraged to return to some regularly scheduled time for Confessions. The schedule may vary from week to week but should be announced in advance for the parishioners' information.
- c) With easier access to churches, *the permission for General Absolution is hereby withdrawn immediately.*

4. The Sunday Obligation

Some parishioners are still expressing concerns about gathering in churches. As well, in light of the need for continued physical distancing, we will not be able to welcome everyone back for the foreseeable future. Therefore, *the dispensation from the Sunday obligation will continue until the end of the liturgical year, that is 27 November 2021.* As before, we will continue to monitor the situation.

I encourage pastors and administrators, where possible, to livestream or broadcast by other means celebrations of the Mass for their parishioners, at least as long as the dispensation from the Sunday obligation is in effect. Many have expressed, over the long haul of the pandemic, how much it means to see their own priests celebrating Mass in their own churches. This practice has been a great comfort to them, when so much of life has been turned upside down.

Concluding Note

We have much to be grateful for in our country, with the benefits of our health care services and the availability of the COVID vaccine. Many countries do not enjoy these benefits. We are grateful for all who continue to put themselves at the service of others to care for the sick and to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in all its manifestations. As we see the proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel”, let us remain steadfast in our care for others – especially the most vulnerable – and for our families and ourselves.

We can take inspiration from the example of the Good Samaritan, as Pope Francis pointed out in his [encyclical](#), *Fratelli Tutti*:

“The parable eloquently presents the basic decision we need to make in order to rebuild our wounded world. In the face of so much pain and suffering, our only course is to imitate the Good Samaritan. ... The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good. ... [The parable] speaks to us of an essential and often forgotten aspect of our common humanity: we were created for a fulfilment that can only be found in love” (3 October 2020, nn. 67-68).

May God give us the strength and insight we need to imitate the Good Samaritan in our everyday lives.

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