



May 14, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Peace and Grace be with you. The past two months have been challenging for all of us as we faced the coronavirus. It has forced us to discontinue public celebrations of the Eucharist and to change our way of life in many ways. We long for the opportunity to return to Mass, to return to work, to visit the sick and attend to the dying. These times have truly helped us to appreciate our parish families and those who serve us so generously.

As you are aware, Governor Cuomo has announced plans to open up the State of New York on a region by region basis. The North Country has met the metrics for re-opening and will be eligible to reopen in phases beginning this week (May 15). The good news is that the precautionary measures we have taken the past two months have reduced the number of COVID-19 cases. This good news is tempered by the great suffering and the large loss of life caused by the virus. While the situation is improving, the danger is not completely gone. We must be vigilant as we move forward, to assure that we keep our people safe as we resume our public worship and other activities.

As Catholics, we know that Christian worship and sacraments are essential for the well-being of the human person. The challenges presented by this pandemic have highlighted just how essential our faith is – far more important than many commercial activities that are now permitted. The faithful are seeking the Eucharist, Confession and the Anointing of the Sick in this time of great sickness, isolation and anxiety. We know that the Eucharist is the source of our strength, unity and spiritual nourishment, and is needed now more than ever. The grace and comfort offered by the Sacraments is more than essential.

To help us re-open our churches and resume public worship, we rely on the guidance of the New York State Department of Health's instructions and the guidance of our local public health officials. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Dana McGuire and Dr. Andrew Williams, of the St. Lawrence County Health Department for their guidance and advice in forming this plan for re-opening. Their generous contributions to the formulation of this plan give me assurance that as we move forward toward more normal worship and parish life, we are doing so in a manner that is responsible and safe. Nothing worthwhile is completely without risk, but we must responsibly manage risks as we implement and monitor our plan.

I am also indebted to members of our committee for reopening our parishes: Dr. Tracy LaFlair, Dr. Lisa Brietenbach, Rita Crowley, PNP, Sandy Lyons, RN, Nancy Levac, RN, and Father Bryan Stitt for their input and work on the plan. It is reassuring to have a team of professionals to guide us in these complex matters. The re-opening of our churches and return to public worship will be measured and gradual. Your cooperation with our guidelines will be greatly appreciated. In preparing this decree, I have relied on Part III of *Guidelines on Sacraments and Pastoral Care*, Phased Restoration of Public Masses ("Mass Guidelines"), which can be found on the website of the Thomistic Institute at <https://thomisticinstitute.org/covid-sacraments>. Where there are differences between the documents found at the Thomistic Institute and our plan and guidelines, the provisions of our plan and guidelines will be followed in the Diocese of Ogdensburg.

Based on the recommendations of church leaders, the Thomistic Institute, public health officials and members of our team, I am issuing the following guidelines for the re-opening of our churches and public worship. These guidelines will become effective when we are able to resume public worship.

1. Attendance will be limited.

- a. As a preliminary matter, a priest who is at high risk or has a respiratory infection of any kind should avoid celebrating public Masses or administering the Sacraments during this phase. The same holds true for those who will be assisting at Mass (e.g. deacons, servers, lectors, sacristans and ushers.)
- b. Gatherings will be limited to the number of persons mandated by governmental regulations, guidelines or recommendations. At the present time, the federal guidelines state that a church can hold gatherings larger than 10 persons, **provided it can provide for strict social distancing**. Each parish should determine the maximum number of attendees based on government guidance and the particular circumstances of their church. You should consult with state and local health officials to determine any restrictions that may affect your parish.
- c. Those who are at higher risk from the virus should remain at home.
- d. Those who are feeling sick or anyone with a cough of any sort should not come to church for Mass or any visit.
- e. Each parish will assure that the number of persons attending public worship do not exceed the appropriate limit. For examples of how this may be done, please see Mass Guidelines [e.g. more frequent celebrations, first-come, first served, rotation system based on first letter or parishioners' last name].
- f. Non-household members are to sit at least six feet from each other.
- g. Locations that have historically had outdoor Masses may continue to do so, provided that all social distancing protocols are strictly followed. Locations that have not had outdoor Masses may not hold outdoor Masses at this time.

2. Screening may be provided.

- a. Each parish may wish to assure that participants in public worship will be screened, if possible. Such screening will consist of questions to ascertain risks of infection and non-contact temperature screening by medical professionals (nurses, doctors, EMTs). Those taking temperatures and screening parishioners should be prepared to offer prudent follow up where a person is exhibiting symptoms of coronavirus.

3. Social Distancing will be Practiced.

- a. All persons, 2 years of age and older, attending Mass will be asked to wear a mask throughout the liturgy.
- b. For Holy Communion, please stay six feet back from the person in front of you. For suggestions on how to implement social distancing, see Mass Guidelines, (“Strict Physical Distancing” on page 5).

- c. Each parish should determine the number and location of Communion stations, which should be configured to provide for safe movement of individuals and social distancing. A small table should be placed at each Communion station, with an unfolded corporal and a bottle of hand sanitizer.
  - d. Each parish shall determine how the distribution of Holy Communion will be safely accomplished in their parish, following one of the options set forth in the Mass Guidelines (see 4. The Distribution of Holy Communion at pp. 7-11.) Strict social or physical distancing must be a priority during the distribution of Holy Communion. During Phase 1, I strongly recommend that parishioners receive the Eucharist in the hand to reduce the risks to the priest and themselves. Those who decide to receive on the tongue are asked to receive at the end of the line, and the person distributing Holy Communion should purify his or her hands immediately afterwards. Those preferring to refrain from receiving the Eucharist for fears associated with Coronavirus are asked to pray an Act of Spiritual Communion.
  - e. Distribution of the Chalice will continue to be suspended.
  - f. There will be no greetings before Mass, holding of hands during Our Father and no exchange of the sign of peace.
  - g. Please use designated entrances and exits and follow directions for movement in order to avoid congregating or contact with others. Parishes should post signs directing where to enter and exit church and to indicate one-way travel in designated aisles. Special provisions will be available for parishioners with mobility issues or other medical issues.
  - h. Maintain social distancing everywhere on church property (parking lots, church steps. Refrain from congregating anywhere in or around the church.
4. A general dispensation from the Sunday obligation will remain in effect.
- a. All persons who are at risk are asked to stay home for your own protection.
  - b. All the faithful are dispensed from the obligation of attending Sunday Mass until further notice.
  - c. While there is no obligation to attend Sunday Mass, we encourage all people to grow in their relationship with the Lord, keep holy the Lord's Day, and maintain contact with their parish by prayer and watching the Mass over the internet or on television. A list of live-streamed Masses is available on our diocesan website.
5. Risk still exists for those attending Mass.
- a. Even the best health practices and social distancing cannot remove all risks of contracting or transmitting the coronavirus.
  - b. Hand sanitizer will be available near the entrances of the church and all are encouraged to perform hand hygiene upon entering and before leaving church.
  - c. Our churches will be cleaned and disinfected as outlined in the March 12, 2020 Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection for COVID-19 For House of Worship (attached). This document may be updated from time to time. Updates will be found at the NYS DOH website: [www.health.ny.gov](http://www.health.ny.gov).

- d. Missalettes, song books and other common use items will be removed from pews. Single use papers with music, readings and prayers may be available to facilitate participation.
- e. Reminders will be given to participants about the importance of social distancing and personal hygiene.

These diocesan guidelines are based on CDC and NYS health mandates and recommendations. Each parish will tailor its plan to conform to its location, size, circumstances, and local governmental directives. There are some changes that you will notice as we celebrate Mass. The changes are intended to reduce the risk of spreading the virus. These changes include:

- Initially, only a certain number of people will be able to physically go to Mass. This is largely determined by the size of the church and the requirements of social distancing.
- All parishioners will wear face coverings while in church to protect themselves and others.
- There will be no holy water in fonts to reduce the risk of infection.
- No offertory processions.
- No passing of the collection basket. The basket will be placed in a fixed location and parishioners will be asked to drop their contributions into the basket as they enter or leave the church.
- The distribution of Communion will be different.
- No worship aids will be available for use, such as missalettes and hymns. This will reduce the risk of spreading the virus.
- There will be no choirs in the early phases of our return to public worship.
- There will be no congregating in the church, on the steps or at the doors of the church so we can maintain social distancing.
- I extend the dispensation of the obligation to attend Sunday Mass until further notice.

Our return to public worship will most likely be gradual. The changes to the Mass will require cooperation and patience. We do not want to contribute to a rebound effect that would negate all the progress that has been made in stopping the spread of this virus. Continuing to follow health guidelines will enable us to resume normal Mass attendance in the near future. Setbacks would push a return to normalcy further into the future. We must put the health and well-being of people ahead of any urge to move too quickly.

Your parish will formulate a safe plan that takes into account its particular circumstances. Let us seek the intercession of Saint Joseph, protector of the Church and Hope of the Afflicted, as we resume our public worship. Asking God to bless you abundantly, I am

Faithfully yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley  
Bishop of Ogdensburg

Issued at Ogdensburg this  
14<sup>th</sup> day of May, 2020.



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Reverend Kevin J. O'Brien, Witness