

Archdiocese of Santa Fe
4000 St. Joseph Place NW
Albuquerque, NM 87120



Telephone: 505-831-8120
Fax: 505-831-8101
Email: archbishop.office@archdiosf.org

OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

October 27, 2020

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

While many of the Catholic faithful in the Archdiocese have agreed with, and expressed appreciation for, the decision to close churches for indoor worship, several persist in concern and have reached out to me. In respect for your opinions, I have met with the COVID-19 Response Team today to seek once again their insight and advice. From our discussion, we have determined that the current course of action is both prudent and necessary. However, it is important to remember that this action is in no way permanent. The COVID-19 Response Team will be continually assessing the situation and medical recommendations over the next several weeks in the hope that we can ease restrictions sooner than later. Hardship is neither pleasant nor welcomed; we continue to seek the common good of all of God's creation.

What are the reasons for the current directives?

Listening to the guidance of State and Local health officials, the following was considered:

- COVID-19 cases and deaths have risen at a rapid rate and have reached alarming numbers. These will likely increase without active countermeasures. A website with concise data is <https://covidtracking.com/data/state/new-mexico>
- The virus is very contagious and carriers often asymptomatic. Even when observing protocols, policies and procedures, there are still many who are contracting the virus.
- Hospitals are already sounding the alarm, with hospitalizations increasing throughout the state. Urban hospitals are reaching capacity in both their Intensive Care Units (ICUs) and their regular facilities, and while some rural hospitals have experienced few cases, they most often have very limited facilities should a local outbreak occur. Rural facilities also often depend on transferring patients to urban hospitals which might quickly be overwhelmed. Such an eventuality could quickly jeopardize response times and availability of critical care. Such is the situation even prior to the outbreak of the normal influenza season.
- Many of our priests, staff, teachers **and parishioners** are in the vulnerable age category, with mortality rates increasing with age. Many care for family members who are elderly and/or have underlying health conditions. A person can be an asymptomatic carrier for weeks, unknowingly infecting those with whom he or she comes in contact—a situation magnified in the winter season with persons remaining in close proximity. We also know the virus is no respecter of age or circumstance. There are even young people without underlying conditions dying from this disease.

- Civic leaders at all levels of government are telling me that they are extremely worried and are doing all they can to keep people from large gatherings indoors for extended periods of time. Catholics in the Archdiocese number in the hundreds of thousands; even with only a 40% attendance, this still amounts to close to 130,000 gathered on any given Sunday.
- As countries around the world have learned, slow and/or poor initial responses to the virus have disastrous consequences. It is critical to stay ahead of the curve and to take forthright action for the safety and wellbeing of all.
- There are many opinions as to the severity of the disease, how easily it is contracted, what is the best way to react to the pandemic, etc. Sadly, the pandemic and its subsequent protocols have been highly politicized. We could debate issues endlessly, or cherry-pick reports which fit one's own presumptions. I believe that we must always act quickly and decisively when human life is at stake. If in retrospect the Archdiocese makes an error in responding to the pandemic, then I would rather err on the side of protecting human life.

With Respect to the Celebration of Holy Eucharist:

The Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives as Catholics--a precious gift beyond compare. Christ is truly present in his very Body and Blood. When we cannot receive the Eucharist together in this way, we long for an important sacrament of our faith, one that sustains us and gives us life. However, this beautiful reality does not negate the many other ways that Jesus is present to us. Though challenging, this time of separation can be an opportunity for growth.

What are the spiritual and ecclesiological reasons that motivated the decision to close our churches once again?

- **Gathered in His Name:** As Our Lord promised in the last verse of Matthew's Gospel, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Mt. 28:20) and again in Matthew, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." (Mt. 18:20) Our rich Catholic faith allows us to remain spiritually healthy during these difficult days even when we cannot get to church. As the Catholic Faithful, we must open up for our people the many ways in which God is reaching out to us now and lead by example. We will eventually be back to church, hopefully sooner rather than later, and in the meantime, we have an opportunity to deepen our prayer lives and to gather our loved ones together in prayer.
- **Embracing the Domestic Church:** Remember the theme we underscored last March: "Home is the holy place." This is a perfect time to emphasize the beauty of the domestic church. We can emphasize the intimacy we have with Christ when we reflect on the scriptures or engage in so many other kinds of Catholic prayer, such as the rosary, the stations and the chaplet of Divine Mercy. Karl Rahner spoke famously about this when he said that if Christianity is to have a future, then we all must become mystics. The presence of Christ in the ordinary, in the everyday fabric of our lives, is a beautiful mystery whose depths we need to plumb ever more deeply. Rahner spoke often and eloquently about the importance of relating to Christ, growing closer to Christ, not just on Sunday but in all the days of the week. In addition, I am thankful that most, if not all, of our parishes do have live streaming which assists our faithful in joining the entire community at prayer as they hear and see their priests calling the parish together around the altar of the Lord.
- **The Practice of Charity:** Charity is at the heart of everything we are doing during this pandemic. As Catholics, we are called to give of ourselves for others. We are avoiding large gatherings

(going to church) for the sake of others. We wear a mask for the sake of others. We are experiencing hardship for the sake of others. By observing these enhanced protocols, each of us has an opportunity to build up the Body of Christ by staying home, ironically, by staying apart from the Body of Christ. It is not about “me”, but about the community and how we can together defeat this virus. It is not about religious liberty or politics but about science and a prudent response to a dangerous virus. Thanks be to God our faith gives us the tools to respond effectively to this global emergency and to grow spiritually at the same time. We pray for the virtue of patience during this time of sacrifice.

Frequently Asked Questions:

While there may still be myriad questions, the following were the most frequently asked. These answers are subject to change, as the situation changes.

- **Can Mass intentions from several Sunday Masses be merged into the one live-streamed Mass?** *Yes, this is fine as long as the donors are aware that this is being done.*
- **Can we celebrate outdoor Masses?** *Yes, as long as you observe proper protocols: masks, distancing, washing hands, etc. While parking lot Mass are not preferable, they are permissible; pastors can obtain limited-range FM broadcast equipment to aid in these. These will be determined by the pastor and his staff. Holy Communion can be received either from ministers going vehicle by vehicle or by a socially-distance and masked reception line as normal.*
- **Can we celebrate daily Mass in the church?** *Churches may be open for individual devotion and prayer; however public daily inside Mass is currently suspended.*
- **Can we receive Holy Communion outside of Mass?** *Yes, at the discretion of the pastor. Deacons and Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist could be utilized as well. Holy Communion can be distributed by scheduled visits to the church or by home visits to those who cannot receive otherwise or are in increased danger should they become infected.*
- **Will missing Mass be a sin?** *Not in this instance. The Archbishop has granted dispensation from attending Mass until further notice due to the pandemic.*
- **Can we continue with Religious Education Classes?** *In general, yes. This should be determined by the pastor and his staff. However, there should be no more than 25% occupancy in the room, follow protocols of masks, distancing, etc., and offer alternatives. PHYSICAL ATTENDANCE IS NOT REQUIRED.*
- **Can I still receive the Sacraments of Reconciliation? Will Anointing of the Sick still be available?** *Pastors can still hear individual confessions as well as give the Anointing of the Sick, as long as protocols are observed.*
- **Can we still celebrate baptisms, weddings and funerals?** *Baptisms, weddings and funerals without Mass are allowed with no more than 10 people attending in the church building, including the priest and other ministers. Outdoor services at the graveside should observe distancing, masking, etc., without large, close gatherings at gravesides. Indoor chapels at cemeteries may be used as long as there are no more than ten people in the chapel at any time. Please contact your parish for specific questions.*
- **How can the Faithful help at this time?** *All the faithful are encouraged to reach out to their family, friends and others during this time of adversity to encourage and lift each other in prayer and our Faith. If someone you know is struggling, encourage them to seek professional guidance from your local crisis center.*

Answers to Comments Received

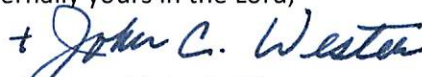
- **“You should worry about the soul, not the body!”** That would be counter to Jesus’ own example, who Himself healed afflicted persons even when it went against the laws governing the Sabbath. The closure of inside Mass is itself a type of “pre-emptive healing” by helping people avoid acquiring a potentially deadly disease. See Luke 13:10-15 for just one recent example from Mass.
- **“You don’t have enough faith! God will keep us from illness!”** God does not suspend His natural laws at our demand; to expect Him to do so is “tempting God”, which Jesus Himself teaches against. By this logic, no one of faith would ever get sick at any time.
- **“We’re adults; we should be able to decide for ourselves!”** Yes, but do you have the right to decide for everyone with whom you might come in contact should you become an asymptomatic carrier/spreader...for weeks? Others will not know you exposed yourself to possible contagion, and may then themselves become spreaders or succumb to the disease.
- **You’re denying our constitutional right to worship!”** Worship is always possible to those with faith—prayer, scriptures, spiritual reading, adoration, etc. God is not limited by His sacraments. The enacted measures are to safeguard against very real and immediate danger to human life and health. Rights are legitimate only until they impinge on the rights of others. Also, as an informational note, the 1st amendment right to worship limits the government, not the internal governance of religions. If COVID-19 had a 50% fatality rate, would you still argue that the government or religious authorities had no right or obligation to protect the public?

We also ought to remember that New Mexico has a centuries-long history of maintaining the faith even before weekly Mass was available. In earlier times, Masses were infrequent, and priests few and far between; it is only in the last 150 years or so with increased population and improved transportation that Mass has become so regularly accessible. And yet the faithful of our state never flagged in fidelity and the worship and love of God. So remember our forebears, the martyrs and the persecuted in the world, who remained faithful even in the most desperate conditions, and know that God gives you, too, the grace and faith to be as steadfast even when sacrificing your attendance at Mass to safeguard the lives of your brothers and sisters. Jesus emphasizes: *“...love one another; even as I have loved you...By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:34-35) And with the shortage of priests, we may experience such infrequency of Mass in the future, so encourage young men to explore vocations to the priesthood.

At the heart of all our prudential judgments is a great love for the Eucharist and for our people. I pray that this latest decision honors both. I pray as well that God will give us all the gift of patience since we still have a long way to go in fighting the coronavirus. This pandemic has deepened my appreciation for each of you and for all that you do for our Church. It has also drawn me closer to you as I appreciate the great gift we share together as brothers and sisters in Christ, a gift that no virus can take away from us since we are one with Christ, the High Priest, who has conquered sin and death through his Resurrection.

With prayers for your well-being and safety, I remain

Faternally yours in the Lord,



Most Reverend John C. Wester
Archbishop of Santa Fe