

# MEMORANDUM

**To:** All Pastors and Priests  
**From:** Office of the Vicar General  
**Re:** Guidelines for the Resumption of Public Masses  
**Date:** June 9, 2020



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## DRVC Guidelines for the Resumption of Public Masses in the Time of COVID-19

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\*\*\* **Please Note:** The Directives that were sent to you on June 6 have been incorporated into these Directives. Please review them, **with special attention towards the procedures for distribution of Holy Communion.** We again ask for your understanding of a much wider context of competing concerns that affect the larger Church, and for your cooperation, in order that we remain reasonably consistent.

Thanks to Fr. John McCartney and our Diocesan procurement Office and staff, you have already received information regarding the supplies (hand sanitizer with pumps; masks) that they obtained and organized for your pickup and use. Please arrange pickup for these supplies before the end of this week.

**Those parishes that have picked up their supplies and that are able to implement and comply with all of the directives issued below, may begin to distribute Holy Communion as of Saturday evening, June 13 (the celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi) in accord with this document.**

We understand that each parish is unique, with different challenges and resources available. In addition, some parish staffs, and even priests have been afflicted by the virus (consider the loss of our dear brother, Monsignor Sosing, Pastor of Holy Name of Mary Church in Valley Stream). Not every parish will be able to immediately resume distribution of Holy Communion or even public Mass in extreme cases. **It is expected, however, that both should be resumed by the weekend of June 20 - 21.**

### Introduction

On April 30, 2020, Archbishop Leonard P. Blair, head of the USCCB Committee on Divine Worship, sent a memorandum to all Bishops of the United States. In it, the Committee recommended a set of guidelines for the re-opening of public Masses and other liturgical celebrations in the dioceses of the United States. These guidelines were developed by an *ad hoc* group of theologians and experts in infectious disease and public health. Their work was coordinated by members of the Thomistic Institute at the Pontifical Faculty of the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C. For those who are interested, you may find their original guidelines at this link: <https://thomisticinstitute.org/covid-sacraments>. This memorandum borrows heavily from those guidelines. However, Bishop Barres introduces this memorandum to instruct pastors and priests in what they must do with regard to the resumption of public Masses throughout the Diocese of Rockville Centre, and it makes clear when pastoral judgment must be exercised in order to apply these directives to individual parishes.

## 1. General Provisions

- The **Dispensation** from the obligation to attend Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation Masses remains in effect for the Diocese of Rockville Centre until further notice. Pastors should publicize this.
- Those at higher risk from COVID-19 (i.e. the elderly or who have underlying health conditions) should be encouraged to stay home. As circumstances allow, a visit from a priest (for Anointing), deacon, or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion to bring them the Eucharist may be possible, observing the usual precautions (masks, social distance, but no gloves when offering Holy Communion).
- Pastors should publicize that those who are not feeling well and anyone with a fever or a cough of any sort should not come to the church to attend Mass, for a visit or for any other ceremonies or purposes. A priest with a respiratory infection of any kind should avoid celebrating public masses or administering sacraments during this phase. The same holds for other ministers who might serve at a Mass (deacon, servers, lectors) as well as for sacristans, ushers, etc.
- Regularly clean and disinfect commonly-touched surfaces in the church. This should be done on a daily basis. Ideally, it should be done between Masses, although this may not always be possible. (See the “Cleaning” section below for suggested details.)
- Masks (or cloth facial coverings) **must be worn** by all present. However, the priest celebrant will **not** wear a mask during the celebration of the Holy Mass. Therefore, any assistants should generally maintain 6 feet of distance from the priest celebrant. **NOTE:** Masks or facial coverings should **not** be worn by children under two years of age or by anyone with breathing difficulties. This should be widely understood so as to prevent conflicts between parishioners.

Facial coverings have been a common practice for several months. Please emphasize to your people that they will not be admitted without one. Any homemade mask or scarf is sufficient, provided that it covers the nose and mouth.

Masks provided to you by the Diocese are not meant to be distributed to the people. Most people have their own and must bring their own. The supply given to the parish is to be kept for clergy, staff and those few who might not have one for Mass, or who might forget to bring one (especially the elderly).

## 2. Limiting the Size of the Congregation & Safety Precautions

- Congregations for all liturgies should be limited in attendance to 25% of the normal seating capacity of the church.
- For public Masses / liturgies / Sacraments, strict physical distancing should be maintained:

It is recommended that you close / block access to 2 of every 3 pews (*one pew open, the next two closed, one pew open, the next two closed*). Some suggested methods of closing pews are printed signs placed on the seats of the pews, ropes, and / or blue painter’s tape that will not damage the finish on wooden pews. Do not use other types of tape on wooden pews.

Families and those who traveled to the church together may sit together. All others must maintain social distancing (**6 feet apart**). With one pew open out of every three, plus the social distancing for non-family members, the 25% rule will easily be maintained.

In areas where the faithful might stand in line (for example, waiting to go to confession or to receive Holy Communion), place tape on the floor to indicate proper spacing between persons.

Encourage the faithful to maintain physical distancing everywhere on the church property (on the church steps, in the parking lot, etc.).

- Suggestions for **restroom use**: limit the number of people who enter a restroom at the same time, and place tape on the floor outside of the restroom to indicate where people should stand in line to wait for the restroom, while maintaining a 6-foot distance from each other.
- All missalettes and hymns should be removed from the pews. Bulletins should not be distributed by ushers or volunteers. If available, bulletins may be left at locations for people to pick up **AFTER** Masses (not before).
- Choirs are discouraged for the time being, especially if seated together. Vigorous singing, especially in close proximity to others, may increase the risk of viral spread. Although hymnals will not be available, cantors and a small group of singers may be used, provided they maintain a social distance greater than 6 feet from others and are wearing masks. The congregation may sing responses if they are masked.
- Holy Water fonts should remain empty. However, Holy Water dispensers (tanks) can remain available for people to take Holy Water home with them.
- It is best to keep servers / assistants to a minimum (perhaps delaying using them for several weeks). Since altar servers will be masked, they are reasonably protected from spreading or being exposed to viruses.
- Collection baskets should not be passed around. It is recommended that collection stations be provided where the faithful can simply drop their collection into a basket or container before or after Mass, or that baskets with poles be used in order to avoid contact.

### 3. Specific Provisions for the Parts of the Mass

- All clergy and assistants for the liturgy must wash or sanitize their hands immediately before the liturgy begins. Clergy and anyone in the sanctuary are **not** to wear gloves. The Center for Disease Control recommends wearing gloves **only** when cleaning or when caring for the sick.
- The priest celebrant should **not** wear a mask or gloves during the celebration of Mass. Instead, he should remain more than 6 feet from the congregation during the entirety of the Mass. In such circumstances, there is no substantial risk of infection. Lectors should not wear masks when reading, or the cantor when leading singing.
  - A further consideration: Wearing a mask and gloves is not warranted by considerations of hygiene if the priest remains a proper distance from the congregation. (An analogy: public health officials do not wear masks during press conferences, given the nature of those public appearances and the distance between the officials and the audience/press.)
- The number of ministers serving in the sanctuary should be greatly limited, especially at the beginning of reopening. To the extent possible, the other ministers (deacon, servers, lectors) should maintain a 6-foot distance from the priest and from each other, except as provided below.

● Until further notice there will be no entrance processions or recessions through the congregation so as to avoid close contact with numerous people. The route taken should be the shortest possible from the sacristy. Some participants may be pre-seated.

○ Priests may place the missal on a stand at the chair or even on the altar when he recites the presidential prayers, rather than having a server hold the book.

○ Maintain a proper distance in the sacristy and during the entrance and recessional processions.

● The offertory procession (bringing up the gifts) should be omitted until further notice.

○ A deacon (if present) or a server may bring the missal, chalice, paten/ciborium, and cruets of wine and water to the altar, while the priest remains at the chair. (Alternatively, the priest could do this himself.) After the deacon or server moves away, the priest could come to the altar and arrange the items on the altar.

○ Two or more corporals should be used. One for the priest celebrant, and others placed some distance away from him on the side of the altar, to consecrate the Holy Eucharist for distribution to the faithful. This allows the priest to proffer the words of consecration directly over the host he will consume, with the other hosts on the altar but not directly in front of the priest as he speaks the Eucharistic prayer.

○ The lavabo should be done by the priest alone, without assistance, either at a credence table near the altar or at the side of the altar itself. After the priest returns to the center of the altar, a server could then remove the lavabo items.

● Special provision should be made for the collection -- baskets should not be passed from person to person. Long-handled baskets could be acceptable if the ushers can remain a suitable distance from others. Alternatively, central boxes or collection points may be set up where the faithful can place their contributions.

● For the elevation of the sacred species at “*Through him, and with him, and in him,*” if a deacon is present, he may stand alongside the priest and elevate the chalice. Since this action is brief, he need not remain a full 6 feet from the priest while doing so.

● The invitation to the faithful to exchange a sign of peace continues to be omitted entirely.

#### **4. The Distribution of Holy Communion**

● In order to reflect both the Church’s great reverence for the Eucharist, while also providing appropriate precautions against infection, Bishop Barres has decided that **Holy Communion in the Diocese of Rockville Centre will be distributed after Mass has ended.**

○ This method has several advantages:

- It more easily allows those who have reservations about receiving Holy Communion at this time to refrain and to leave the Church.

- It allows for the priest / deacons / extraordinary ministers to wear a mask during the distribution while preserving the principle that the priest would never be masked during Mass.

- It more easily provides the opportunity to set up the Communion stations (as explained below).

- It will also permit the priest to remove his chasuble for the distribution of Holy Communion, given that it is difficult to launder if anyone should touch him or sneeze or cough on him.

○NB: As noted above, as of April 22, the CDC's most recent guidance states: "Currently, there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with food," and "there is likely very low risk of spread from food products or packaging."

○Mass followed by the distribution of Holy Communion, following the safety protocols outlined below, holds in balance the dignity of our worship, the liturgical laws of our Church, and reasonable safety precautions.

- At the start of Mass, or at a suitable point during Mass, the priest should explain that those who desire to receive Holy Communion may do so after the conclusion of the Mass. He should add that the faithful must maintain a 6-foot distance from each other as they come forward for Holy Communion.

- **The Precious Blood** may **not** be distributed to the faithful, nor should the faithful receive the Eucharist by intinction. (A deacon or a concelebrating priest, if present, may receive by intinction.)

- A sufficient quantity of hosts for distribution to the faithful should be consecrated at the Mass. At the appropriate time, the ciboria should be placed on extra corporals, on the altar, but off to the sides of the altar (not directly in front of the priest).

- The priest (and, if present, the deacon) would consume the Eucharist in the normal way, but would not immediately proceed to distribute Communion to the servers or the faithful. Rather, the newly-consecrated hosts would be briefly placed in the tabernacle awaiting the conclusion of the Mass.

- After the concluding blessing and the dismissal, the priest (and deacon, if present) remain in the sanctuary. At the chair, the priest removes his chasuble and the deacon removes his dalmatic.

- A small table should be placed at each communion station, with an unfolded corporal, an ablution cup or bowl and a bottle of hand sanitizer with a pump (these have been provided by the Diocese).

- The priest (and any other ministers distributing Holy Communion) should use hand sanitizer immediately before approaching the tabernacle and / or their Communion station. They must also put on a surgical mask or cloth face covering.

  - NB: If the priest who has celebrated the Mass is in a higher-risk group, a different priest, arriving at the conclusion of Mass, might distribute Holy Communion in his place.

- Now vested in alb and stole, the priest retrieves the newly-consecrated hosts from the tabernacle and returns to the altar.

- Holding up a single host, he says: "*Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.*" He then leads the people in saying: "*Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word, and my soul shall be healed.*"

- The priest and other ministers (if present) proceed to the places prepared for distribution of Communion. Each stands next to a table with corporal, ablution cup or bowl and hand sanitizer in order to distribute Communion.

- The faithful should remove any face coverings immediately before receiving Holy Communion.

- Holy Communion may not be distributed with gloves, nor may it be received in the hand if a member of the faithful is wearing gloves.

- Hand hygiene is effective against the virus. In these circumstances, gloves are not needed if the priest performs hand hygiene.

- The faithful receive Holy Communion in the normal way. If the minister of Communion senses that his fingers have made contact with a person's hands or mouth, he should pause, place the ciborium on the corporal, use the ablution cup and then use hand sanitizer. He may repeat this process as often as he judges necessary during the distribution of Holy Communion. It is not necessary, however, for him to use hand sanitizer between each communicant, unless he makes actual contact.

- **Communion on the tongue vs. in the hand:** We have carefully considered the question of Communion on the tongue vs. Communion in the hand. Given the Church's existing requirements on this point (see *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 92), and recognizing the differing judgments and sensibilities that are involved, we believe that, with the precautions listed here, it is possible to distribute on the tongue without unreasonable risk. It is recommended that the minister use the hand sanitizer after each communicant who receives on the tongue. We have consulted several medical experts on these protocols.

- **No communicant in the Diocese of Rockville Centre may be denied the reception of Holy Communion on the tongue.**

- The faithful may be encouraged to receive in the hand before distribution begins.

- If this is to become an issue in a particular parish, a prie-dieu may be set up at a convenient location in the Church, and those wishing to receive on the tongue may be directed to go to that station where they can receive kneeling. Receiving Communion on the tongue while kneeling makes it much less likely that the minister of Holy Communion would ever come into physical contact with the person's mouth. It also allows for a minister who is comfortable with distributing Communion in this way to be selected for this task.

- At the conclusion of the distribution of Holy Communion, the priest and any other ministers return the remaining hosts to the tabernacle.

- The faithful may depart after making a brief prayer of thanksgiving.

## **5. Cleaning:**

- If possible, open windows and doors between Masses for ventilation.

- If bathrooms are available, they should be cleaned between Masses, using disposable gloves.

- Follow the same procedures that you already use for cleaning your church / hall / etc.

- If possible, between Masses, wooden pews (especially the surfaces that can be touched) can be cleaned as usual, but should also be disinfected as follows, using disposable gloves:

- Fill a spray bottle with 2 cups water, 1 cup white vinegar and about five drops dish soap.

- Spray the solution onto the wood areas and wipe off with a damp cleaning rag. Using a damp rag removes traces of the vinegar and soap. Continue across the wood section until the area is cleaned and disinfected.
- Wipe the furniture with a dry-cleaning rag to remove any excess moisture. Be sure to wash or dispose of any rags and cleaning materials.

**Side Note:** Although “drive-in” Masses are unlikely to be necessary, now that we are returning to the celebration of Mass inside our Churches, the following directives are offered for your information. **Outdoor Masses (outside of cars)** must follow all of the above directives and procedures, especially regarding masks, social distancing and Holy Communion distribution.

Regarding the distribution of Holy Communion at “drive-in or outdoor Masses”, communicants should get out of their cars to receive, one car at a time.

- This should be done akin to what is required above for Holy Communion after Mass.
- This is preferable from a public health perspective, because it permits the priest (wearing a mask but not gloves) to stand next to a hand sanitizing station (a table with corporal and hand sanitizer, as described above) and thus gives him the ability to sanitize his hands after each Holy Communion, if necessary. If the priest walks from car to car or from window to window, this hand hygiene would be difficult.
- It is also preferable from a sacramental perspective, because it removes the temptation to pass the Eucharist from person to person in the car, if a passenger is not near an open window, and eliminates the problem of self-communication.
- In addition, distribution of the Eucharist in another vessel or container (a plastic bag, paper cup, or a metal pyx) is not warranted from a public health perspective and may even increase risk: CDC guidance suggests that the virus is not easily transmitted by food, whereas passing other containers from person to person involves more contact with surfaces.
- From a sacramental perspective, there are additional reasons to discourage this practice, dealing with reverence for the sacrament, the problem of self-communication, the danger of profanation, and the problem of purifying or disposing of containers.

## Conclusion

Bishop Barres asks all pastors, priests, deacons in the Diocese of Rockville Centre to read this memorandum and put its directives into effect for their parishes, staffs, volunteers and parishioners. We have all suffered greatly in being deprived of public Mass for nearly three months. Now is the time to resume, but with prudence. We do not want problems to arise by lax or inconsistent practices which could result in greater restrictions being unjustly placed upon us. As we emerge from this pandemic, it is important that we act together in order to bring the faithful safely back to Church and to communal worship. This will require patience, pastoral wisdom and prudence. However, with the help of Our Lord, and our Lady, along with much prayer, we will come through this as well.

## *Oremus pro invicem!*

- Fr. Eric R. Fasano  
Vicar General