



Office of the Bishop

Diocese of Brownsville

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May 22, 2020

To the Catholic Faithful of the Diocese of Brownsville:

With gratitude to God, I am able to announce that conditions are now such that the Catholic churches and mission chapels in the Rio Grande Valley can, on Monday, May 25, 2020, resume the public celebration of Masses and other sacramental rites. This will take place with abundant precaution and strict protocols in keeping with the recommendations of health officials.

I have made this decision after communication with local civil and health officials, and with close attention to the advisories of state and federal government officials, and after continuous consultation with the deans in the eight deaneries that comprise the Diocese of Brownsville, and with countless others, laity, clergy and religious.

For us to proceed forward toward the resumption of public Masses, it is important for us all to keep a few things clearly in mind. The danger the COVID-19 virus poses to our communities remains formidable. Thus, even as we suspended the public celebration of Masses as an act of charity for the common good, so we must resume our public celebrations aware that we continue to bear a grave obligation in charity to do whatever we can to protect one another and the wider community from infection.

I urge in the strongest terms that those who are advanced in years, or suffer from complicating medical conditions, or feel in any way sick, should stay home. If you do not currently feel safe going out, even to Mass, stay home. The dispensation of the Catholic faithful from the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday remains in effect. We will continue to provide livestream broadcasts of parish and diocesan Masses for the benefit of those who should remain home.

The parishes have been sent instructions with strict protocols to protect the health and safety of those who attend Mass and the wider community of the Rio Grande Valley. Our parishes will observe social distancing, face-masks will for now be required for those attending Mass, and parishioners will be required to disinfect their hands as they enter and leave the church. There will be special instructions for the reception of Holy Communion.

Occupancy at any given Mass will be limited by the fact that only every other pew will be used for seating, and six feet will be observed between family groups and individuals. In most cases, this means that occupancy for Mass will be less than 50 percent. Since churches will have limited

seating capacity, I encourage those who can go to Mass to consider going on a weekday to alleviate the pressure on Sunday Mass capacity.

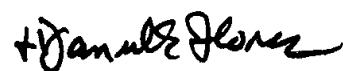
I have indicated to the pastors that they have the authority to judge if in their particular parish they are ready with sufficient supplies and volunteers to open the church for public Masses. If a particular parish is not ready to implement the necessary protocols, they should not open until they are. In addition, some parishes may find it necessary to readjust the Mass schedule to allow enough time for the work of disinfecting the church after every Mass.

There are other particular instructions that are included in the information already sent to the parishes, and the parishes will make these known to parishioners as circumstances warrant. But I would like to call attention to just a few major points:

- If the parish has a chapel for perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, pastors should not resume full operation at this time. The enclosed spaces and the difficulty of frequent disinfecting procedures as people enter and leave involve high risks that should not be undertaken. Adoration and Benediction can take place in the main church, at set times, observing the protocols of distancing and the use of masks and the use of disinfecting protocols after the Benediction.
- Confessions should not be heard in enclosed spaces where the six feet of distance cannot be observed.
- Other sacramental rites can be celebrated provided the usual protocols are observed.
- Parish offices can open, but only if the receptionist and secretary or other personnel have the space to practice social distancing and observe regular protocols of disinfecting hands and surfaces frequently. Masks should be used in any area where the public or coworkers are present.
- Small meetings can take place on parish premises, provided the protocols indicated are observed.

As we proceed, we must be vigilant and alert. We do not know what the future holds, but we maintain our hope in God “who so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” The reopening of our churches is a cause of great joy. May we receive this gift from the Lord as a grace to prepare ourselves to celebrate the great Solemnity of Pentecost. We humbly ask the Holy Spirit to protect our communities from all harm, to give us the charity and fortitude we need to face the uncertainties of the future, and to grant us the joy of an ever deeper communion with the Risen Christ who, to the glory of God the Father, dwells in us and with us by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Daniel E. Flores". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly stylized font.

+Daniel E. Flores
Bishop of Brownsville