



Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama

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Office of the Bishop

May 11, 2020

Dear Priests, Deacons, Consecrated Religious, Seminarians, and All Faithful People of the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama:

The Lord is risen! Indeed He is risen! Alleluia!

I wish to commend and thank you for your faith and patience during the suspension of public worship that we have observed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While there is still some cause for concern and it is important that we continue to be careful, it also seems opportune for us to begin the process of re-opening – now also permitted by State and local authorities.

With this letter, therefore, I wish to accomplish three goals: **1.** Provide guidelines for the restoration of public worship; **2.** Issue a new dispensation for the Mass obligation (replacing the previous one of March 13, 2020); **3.** Ask that certain prayers be said during public worship.

Guidelines for the Restoration of Public Worship

I hereby declare that Pastors and Administrators of the Diocese are permitted to restore public worship in their parishes beginning on Wednesday, May 13, 2020 – the Memorial of Our Lady of Fatima. This declaration is subject to the following qualifications:

- Pastors and Administrators are permitted and even encouraged to hold outdoor Masses, especially in parishes where the church building has low ceilings or does not have good air circulation.
- Pastors and Administrators should review the safety guidelines and protocols recommended by the Alabama Department of Public Health (accessible at <https://alabamapublichealth.gov/covid19/assets/cov-sah-worship.pdf>), to include details like using every other row of pews and encouraging safe distancing between family units.
- Pastors and Administrators may also wish to review the paper circulated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which includes recommendations for the re-opening process (accessible via <https://thomisticinstitute.org/covid-sacraments>).
- The physical exchange of the sign of peace at liturgies should continue to be omitted, allowing for the possibility of a simple bow, at the discretion of the celebrant.
- Communion should be distributed to the faithful under the form of the Host only, recalling that Christ is present whole and entire even under only one form.

- Those who wish to wear face masks to church must lower them *before* receiving Holy Communion, in order to avoid any accidents.
- Gloves may never be used in the distribution of Holy Communion; neither should the faithful receive communion in gloved hands – gloves must be removed before receiving.
- Holy water fonts should continue to remain empty; holy water tanks/dispensers (for people to fill their own bottles) can and should remain available so that the faithful may not be deprived of this important sacramental for their private use.
- I verify that the “grave reason” mentioned in canon 1000 § 2 of the *Code of Canon Law* for the use of an “instrument” for the Anointing of the Sick remains. Therefore, whenever a priest deems it opportune to use a cotton ball or swab to anoint a person who has begun to be in danger of death due to sickness or old age, he may do so, dipping it only once in the Oil of the Sick and then disposing of it reverently by burning and burial afterwards.
- Priests should continue offering the Sacrament of Reconciliation/Penance, but with “social distancing” protocols and precautions (e.g., outdoors or in large rooms, always careful to safeguard privacy), until we determine that it is safe to return to the use of regular confessionals or reconciliation rooms.
- Baptism should not be delayed. Priests and deacons should strive to maintain social distancing while celebrating it. The anointing with the Oil of Catechumens may be omitted (as the rubrics indicate); the anointing with the Oil of Chrism may be done with a cotton ball or swab instead of with the thumb, if desired. It would be best not to schedule baptisms of multiple children, but to celebrate each one distinctly. However, in cases where they do take place, it is recommended to have the blessed water in a separate bowl or pitcher and for the font to be empty; the water may be poured over the head into the font, such that each person receives fresh water and what ends up in the font does not get reused.
- Pastors and Administrators should encourage e-Giving; they may also wish to have ushers use collection baskets with handles or ask the faithful to deposit their donations in baskets at collection points, instead of passing baskets around and so, risking contagion.
- Consider seriously the option of outdoor Masses for those areas of the Diocese where the number of COVID-19 cases remains high, the risk of infection is great, and where there is sufficient space on church property to do so.

I otherwise leave it up to the discretion of Pastors and Administrators to determine the best ways to re-start public worship in their parishes while avoiding any extremes, and respecting sound sacramental theology and Church law. Do not hesitate to contact me with any ideas or questions.

All the foregoing directives shall remain in place until June 30, 2020 or until I or my successor, Bishop Steven J. Raica, may determine otherwise.

Dispensation of All from the Mass Obligation

The dispensation from the obligation of assisting at Mass that I gave to certain groups of the faithful on March 13, 2020 *is hereby revoked*. I now grant a new dispensation from the obligation of assisting at Mass on Sundays and Holy Days to all the Roman Catholic faithful who reside in the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama, with the following additional indications:

- This dispensation is granted, recognizing that not all will feel comfortable to return to public worship right away, due to concerns or fears about COVID-19.
- Some who are pregnant, immunocompromised, or otherwise in a higher-risk category will wisely wish to wait some time until returning to public worship.
- Recognizing that almost three-quarters of the deaths from COVID-19 in the State of Alabama have been among those aged 65 or over, those in that category should most certainly exercise caution and stay home until it is safer to resume public group activities.
- I urge clergy and laity alike to stay away from Mass if they feel sick.

I grant this dispensation until June 30, 2020, leaving it to our new shepherd, Bishop Steven J. Raica, to make further provision around that time as he sees fit.

I also wish to remind the faithful of the so-called “Easter Duty” – i.e., the precept of the Church that we must confess our mortal sins in kind and number at least once a year and receive Holy Communion in the state of grace during Lent or the Easter season. If you are unable to fulfill your Easter Duty before Pentecost due to the pandemic, please resolve to do so as soon as it is reasonably possible, after the danger has passed. We are not bound to the impossible.

Requested Prayers during Holy Mass

In order to render suitable thanks to the Lord for carrying us through this pandemic, pray for those who have died from it or are still suffering, and ask for special protections going forward, I also ask that Pastors and Administrators select a suitable prayer to recite either at the conclusion of the General Intercessions or after the blessing and dismissal at all public Masses until June 30, 2020 (or pending further direction from Bishop Raica).

With continued prayers for you and yours, I remain

Faithfully yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Robert J. Baker, S.T.D.
Apostolic Administrator of Birmingham in Alabama



Very Reverend Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Chancellor

cc: Most Reverend Steven J. Raica, J.C.D.
Very Reverend Justin L. Ward, S.T.L.

Reverend Monsignor Michael J. Deering, V.G.
Very Reverend Joseph G. Culotta, V.C.