



Diocese of Saint John Protocols for the Public Celebration of Masses and Other Religious Services in Third and Fourth Phases of GNB Health and Safety Measures

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a serious threat to physical health. In response, public authorities are right to place reasonable limits on gatherings, to discourage unnecessary activities, and to call for physical distancing. At the same time, access to divine worship and to sacraments is of high importance for the spiritual good and the overall well-being of the faithful. As Catholics, we maintain that Christian worship and sacraments are just as necessary for the human person—indeed, far more necessary—than many commercial activities now permitted. This is particularly true in a time of widespread anxiety and potentially grave sickness.

In the “third phase” (Orange), which allows a maximum gathering of 10 people, and the “fourth phase” (Yellow) which allows a maximum gathering of 50 people (subject to eventual increase), while keeping a 2m physical distancing, certain restrictions are necessary for the celebration of Mass. It is suggested, in the yellow phase, that the regular schedule for Masses would resume in each parish. If and when all the following protocols are followed, keeping in mind the maximum number per gathering, more Masses may be required for the faithful to attend Mass. Currently each priest is permitted to celebrate two Masses per day, or three Masses per weekend. If there is a pastoral need to celebrate more Masses, each priest is required to contact Bishop Riesbeck to discuss possibilities.

PLEASE NOTE: At least one person in each parish must be identified as being responsible for the operational guidelines for the parish. Each parish should have a Pandemic Protocol Committee in place, to support the Coordinator.

Sunday and Weekday Masses and other religious services (eg. Weddings, funerals, baptisms, confessions, Holy Hours) are possible in each parish under the following protocols:

The general dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday remains in effect. Those who fall into the “vulnerable” category (age, health, etc.) are encouraged to stay home. As restrictions are loosened, and as circumstances allow, a visit from a priest, deacon, or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion to bring them the Eucharist may be possible. Those with a cough of any sort, and anyone feeling sick, should not come to the church or parish office for any reason.

Screening questions, issued by the GNB, are to be posted at the entrance point of every church. The same questions are to be communicated to parishioners in the announcement of Masses (bulletin, social media, website, etc.). Parishioners will be required to read the screening questions (found in appendix), and if the answer is yes to any of the questions, they will not be able to attend the Mass. Hand sanitizing stations (either alcohol-based hand cleaner or soap and water) are required at the entrance and exit of each church. If a supply of hand sanitizer or soap and water are not possible, each parish is required to communicate to parishioners the need to bring their own, and to practice proper hand hygiene prior to, and in leaving, the church.

Parishioners are asked to wear masks/face coverings when attending Mass. Those under the age of two, those who would have difficulty removing their own masks, and those with pre-existing respiratory conditions which would make wearing a mask difficult, are discouraged from wearing masks.

A priest with a respiratory infection (colds, flu, pneumonia, etc.) of any kind should avoid celebrating public Masses or administering the Sacraments during this phase. The same holds true for other ministers who might serve at a Mass, as well as for sacristans, ushers, etc.

A clearly identified “Entrance” and “Exit” are to be made available in each church. Ushers will be required to be at the entrance of the church to help direct parishioners where they are to sit for the duration of the Mass. If possible, the entrance and exit doors of the church are to be left unlocked and propped open. All other doors should be closed, to help maintain the flow of “traffic”. Tape, or other markers, can be used to indicate proper spacing between persons while waiting in line for confession or to receive Holy Communion.

In order to keep the 2m physical distancing law issued by the GNB, parishioners are asked to sit in every second or third pew, or row of chairs, maintaining 2m from others. Family units, and “household bubbles” are permitted to sit in the same pew. People are asked to sit 2m apart in each pew. The pews/rows being used should be clearly marked as to which pew/row is available to seat people.

Ushers can assist with instructing parishioners where to sit. In order to ease the flow of foot traffic, those who arrive first will be seated in the next available pew/row from the front of the church.

There is to be only one lector, responsible for the readings and the responsorial psalm. The Gospel will be proclaimed in the usual manner. The microphone should be stationary and should not be adjusted by the lector or priest.

Singing is not recommended. Hymnals and any other “shared” resources are to be removed from the pews. Instrumental music can be provided.

The parts of the Mass, usually sung, should be spoken (Gloria, Kyrie, Gospel Acclamation, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, Memorial Acclamation, Great Amen, etc.).

Altar servers are not to be permitted.

The Offertory will not be collected during the Mass. Instead, baskets can be placed at the entrance/exit of the church for parishioners to place their envelope/donation. We continue to encourage electronic donations.

There will not be an Offertory procession.

The sign of peace, by physical contact, is to be omitted.

The hosts for the Communion of the faithful to be consecrated can be placed on a second corporal toward the side of the altar. 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 prays the Eucharistic prayer.

For the distribution of Holy Communion, the priest will be the only minister of Communion. No extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are to be used, unless the priest himself is not physically/medically able to distribute Communion. In this case, one extraordinary minister of Holy Communion can be appointed for Communion, following the same hygiene practices below. The priest will wash/sanitize his hands prior to distributing Communion. The Precious Blood is not to be distributed to the faithful.

The distribution of Holy Communion may take place at the proper time, after the priest consumes both the Host and Precious Blood to complete the Sacrifice, or after the final blessing, at the end of Mass.

With the understanding that Communion may be received on either the tongue or in the hand, in these exceptional circumstances, in charity, we are asking our faithful to receive Communion in the hand. It has been shown that Covid-19 is spread through respiratory droplets. A person coming forward for Communion wearing a face covering, unless unable to, can receive Communion, take a few steps, lower their face covering, and then consume the host. This will help us maintain the 2m physical distancing rule and also ensure the safety of all who are receiving Communion, including the priest celebrant who is giving Communion. Many of our priests also fall in the “vulnerable” category, and some have pre-existing health conditions. We are concerned for them also. The decision to ask the faithful who devoutly receive Communion on the tongue to receive in the hand is not one that is being taken lightly. We acknowledge that to receive Communion on the tongue is still the norm. I am deeply aggrieved by this temporary request to the faithful, and this is only for the duration of this pandemic crisis, but in my heart I feel compelled to make this request for the health and safety of all.

The priest is to be very diligent about properly sanitizing his hands for Communion. If the priest makes contact with the communicant while distributing the Sacred Species, he is to return to the sanctuary, or have a small table beside him, with an ablution cup and hand sanitizer. He should first purify his hands, and then either wash or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer before returning to distribute to the rest of the faithful.

The priest should wear a mask/face covering while distributing Communion to the faithful, unless unable to. Gloves are not to be worn by the celebrant at any time during the Mass. The faithful are required to remove gloves before receiving Communion, if receiving on the hand.

Parishes are encouraged to continue livestreaming their Masses, if possible, to allow those unable to attend Mass in person the option of participating in Mass from home.

High touch areas should be properly cleaned and sanitized after each Mass or religious service. Even with best health practices and physical distancing, anyone who enters a public space should recognize there is a risk of contracting Covid-19. Improved cleaning will occur at our churches, but we can never remove the risk 100%. The objective is to minimize risk as much as possible, while abiding by the safety regulations set forth by the GNB.

It is important that we abide by health and safety protocols. For the interest of the common good and ultimately to best serve our own faith communities we do not want to contribute to a rebound effect that would actually push normalized Mass attendance even further into the future. We should embrace these Diocesan protocols in good faith, understanding that they are temporary.

We also know the desire to return to parishes, participate in the liturgy, and receive the Eucharist is incredibly strong, but we ask that everyone approach these next phases with a patient, loving and charitable mindset.

May Mary, Health of the Sick, Comforter of the Afflicted and Mother of the Church accompany us always.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christian Riesbeck". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Christian Riesbeck, CC
Bishop of Saint John
May 15, 2020