

**For Immediate Release
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—The Roman Catholic Diocese of—
BATON ROUGE

Bishop Duca Modifies Guidelines on Mass Attendance

Changes in Social Distancing

More Pews to Open

Masks Still Required

Dispensation from Obligation to Attend Sunday Mass to be Lifted June 6, 2021

With “prayerful and cautious optimism” Bishop Michael Duca has published new directives on social distancing aimed at encouraging more Catholic faithful to worship safely at churches throughout the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

One directive has not changed: Masks will still be required to attend Mass.

The action comes after Gov. John Bel Edwards made revisions last week to state guidelines on masking and other COVID policies.

“Most of the guidelines the governor has modified deal with the wearing of masks in gatherings outside and inside of buildings,” the bishop said. “Each of these is modified depending on the amount and possibility of physical distancing. Of particular importance for gathering in church is the guideline that allows the option to gather at full capacity for Mass if masks are worn. Because it is my desire to be able to invite more of our parishioners back to Mass and have a place for them as they return, I have decided that we will keep the mandate to wear masks and begin to lessen the physical distancing as more parishioners return to church,” he added.

The Bishop’s letter, titled *Wear Your Mask and Return to Mass!*, amplifies and supplements guidelines he sent to priests and deacons on Thursday and provides the date when the dispensation from the requirement to attend Mass will be lifted.

The bishop said, “Since with this change we can accommodate everyone who wishes to return to Mass, I have decided that, as long as we are able to continue to reduce the spread of Covid in our diocese and state, I plan to formally lift the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass on June 6, 2021, the Feast of Corpus Christi. This will allow us, with the use of masks, to move to 100% capacity as people return to Mass.”

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He did, however, assure Catholics that they should continue to consider themselves exempt from the obligation to attend Mass “if they are unvaccinated, or if they have underlying conditions which make the virus more dangerous, or if they are simply fearful,” he added.

How the new rules are implemented will depend on the size of each parish church, its capacity and its ability to safely accommodate more worshipers as social distancing is reduced. In general, most parishioners will probably see all pews in their churches open for the first time since March of last year.

The bishop said, “While some parishes still use every other pew, especially where they have a large church and a smaller congregation, many others are already using every pew. I encourage all our pastors, where they are able and if the people seem in support, to open all your pews and encourage physical distancing of four to six feet, to begin with, letting the parishioners find their comfort zones.

The bishop also issued a word of caution to the faithful. “In considering these new guidelines,” he said, “I want us to be aware that COVID is still spreading, even if at low and stable levels, and this should be a part of our consideration. To pretend that the danger is completely over could sabotage all the efforts and progress we have made up to this point. Yet with this caution acknowledged, I want to offer for the first time since this pandemic began a more proactive process to bring us all back together in our churches again.”

The bishop’s letter can be accessed in its entirety at <http://diobr.org/news/wear-your-mask-and-return-to-mass>

The faithful are encouraged to check with their parish media platforms for more information on how the new directives will be implemented at their churches.

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