

Dear Parishioners,

Due to continued technical issues, we will not be live-streaming the Sunday Mass from St. Mary's in Silver Bay this weekend. I encourage you to participate in Sunday Mass via live-stream from another source, or to watch the broadcast of the televised Sunday Mass at 9:30am. We will make every effort to have the live-stream back up and running by next weekend.

Now I would like to address what is probably on a lot of our minds right now: the state mandate in Minnesota to wear a face covering while in indoor settings. As we may have heard, this mandate goes into effect tomorrow morning, Saturday, July 25. Allow me to answer the question that is probably on everyone's mind at this time: Does this mean that we need to wear face coverings while we are at Mass or otherwise in the Church? The answer to that is "yes." Houses of worship are not exempt from the face covering mandate, which means that we are now all required to wear a face covering while at Mass or otherwise in the Church.

There are some important exceptions to this mandate, however. First, children who are five (5) years old or younger do not need to wear a mask. Also, those for whom wearing a face covering would be unreasonable or difficult due to health conditions are exempt. Here's the exact language from the mandate to assist us in understanding who this includes:

"Individuals with a medical condition, mental health condition, or disability that makes it unreasonable for the individual to maintain a face covering. This includes, but is not limited to, individuals who have a medical condition that compromises their ability to breathe, and individuals who are unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove a face covering without assistance. These individuals should consider using alternatives to face coverings, including clear face shields, and staying at home as much as possible."

Also, if you are praying in the Church alone, you do not need to wear a mask. The priest, deacon, reader and cantor at Mass will wear masks when they are not speaking or singing, but the mandate also allows for masks to be removed when a person is engaged in public address or lecture, which would include the above ministries. Here's the relevant quotation from the Minnesota government website- Masks can be temporarily removed "When testifying, speaking, singing, or performing in an indoor business or public indoor space, in situations or settings such as theaters, news conferences, courtroom proceedings, or lectures, provided that social distancing is always maintained."

As always, masks will be made available for your use at the Church should you need one.

Having laid out the current law for us, I would like to offer some thoughts here that I would humbly ask each parishioner to please consider and take to heart. I know that the wearing or not wearing of masks is a polarizing topic for many. Unfortunately, we have frequently seen examples in the news of people even physically harming one another over the issue of wearing masks. Different people have different opinions, and some people feel very strongly about the

wearing of masks, or the not-wearing of masks. As your pastor, I ask you to please consider a few points.

First, wearing or not wearing masks is not a matter of religious liberty. While some may feel that the government mandating the wearing of masks is an infringement of personal liberty, there is no way that I can see in which such a mandate infringes upon our religious liberty. In other words, we can worship and practice our faith just as easily (though perhaps not as comfortably) while wearing a mask as when we are not wearing a mask. Doing so does not impede our freedom of religion.

Second, please recognize that while the governor's mandate states that enforcement and penalties are not the goal of the mandate, but rather that he hopes that Minnesotans will comply with the mandate voluntarily, there are penalties and fines listed for "willful non-compliance." Please especially note that it is the business, organization, or, in our case, the parish that bears the brunt of possible fines if people are not complying while they are on our premises.

Third, and I think this point is especially important, the Frequently Asked Questions section on the Minnesota governor's website directly addresses the question of what to do when someone is not wearing a mask indoors. I am going to quote it here for your consideration. In response to the question of "Should I say something if someone near me is not wearing a face covering", the state says, "There are people who may not be able to wear face coverings for a variety of reasons and you may not be able to tell why just by looking at a person. Unless you are a business responsible for ensuring worker and customer compliance with the Executive Order, do not confront a person about why they are not wearing a face covering but instead, if possible, ask them to maintain social distance. Face coverings protect others from you, so the best option is for you to continue to wear your face covering and, where possible, physically distance yourself at least six feet from persons not wearing face coverings. Remember, we're all in this together and not everyone is able to wear a face covering."

I quote this in full because I wish to ask all parishioners to please be as charitable, patient and kind as possible to one another as we work together to adhere to legitimate authority, and as we try to do our part in slowing the spread of this virus. If you should see someone not wearing a mask at Mass, the best thing to do is to assume that they have a health condition that would make wearing a mask difficult for them, and leave it at that. The Church should be a place of unity, and never a place of divisiveness, so I humbly ask that while we need to comply with the face covering mandate, we always do so in a charitable and kind manner.

I would also ask that we remember that sometimes, as Christians, we are called to do things that we may not like for the sake of the common good. There may be some of us who dislike the idea of having to wear masks at all, especially at Church. Here, I would ask you to please consider this as an opportunity for dying to self and doing something that you do not like for the good of others.

Lastly, I would again like to ask all of us for patience. This pandemic has caused a lot of serious difficulties and hardships. Besides the suffering and death of many, there have been economic hardships, as well as the understandable fear and anxiety. It often feels like things are constantly changing- our understanding of this disease, the response asked of us by the government, the protocols that we have to follow at Church, etc. If you are like me, you can get to a point where we want to say, "enough!" But my friends, it's true- we are all in this together. We are one Body, the Family of God, and this is an opportunity for us to live a difficult, but incredibly important balance. On the one hand, we have an obligation to respect and obey legitimate authority, and we also have an obligation to act toward the common good of all, and not just our own good. On the other hand, we are called by our Lord Jesus not to live in fear, and not to allow anxiety and worry to rule our lives. And I believe that as faithful Catholics, we can lead the way right now in our society, which is so very confused and frightened by all of this. We can demonstrate that it is possible to both refuse to live in fear, living our lives with trust in God, and also to take prudent steps to protect our health and the health of others. Even something like this mask mandate has the potential to build and inspire faith, because God can and does bring good out of every circumstance. For example, if I am a person who does not like having to wear masks, perhaps, each time that I have to put on my mask, instead of grumbling, I say a brief prayer for those who are sick and suffering due to COVID-19. On the hand, if I am a person who is particularly zealous about wearing masks and wishing others to wear masks as well, when I see someone not wearing a mask, instead of assuming that they are being obstinate, I give them the benefit of the doubt and say a prayer for them. If everyone did this, faith would grow in leaps and bounds!

Brothers and sisters, I am proud of these parishes and the love that you have for one another and for Christ. I humbly ask for your cooperation in regards to the wearing of masks and all that that entails. As always, I welcome your questions and concerns, and encourage you to call me, email me, or stop by for a visit should you wish to discuss any of this further. I thank you for your time and consideration. Please know that you are in my prayers, and I ask that you please keep me in yours.

God bless you!

Fr. Steve Laflamme  
Pastor