

June 17, 2021

Dear Parishioners,

As I am sure you have heard, this past week the governor announced that COVID-19 restrictions would be lifted throughout New York State. This is of course good news! Right from the beginning of this pandemic, the Archdiocese and St Simon Stock – St Joseph parish has followed the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and we will continue to do so.

In accordance with these guidelines social distancing limits, capacity restrictions, physical distancing, cleaning and disinfection are now optional for businesses and other organizations such as houses of worship. Masks are no longer required to be worn when you come to church except for those who are unvaccinated. Unvaccinated people (including children) have to continue to wear masks in church. For vaccinated people they are optional and no longer required.

What does this mean for our parish? The most recent update from the Archdiocese states that Pastors may now take the following course of action:

- Parishes are no longer required to conduct additional cleanings and disinfection. In accordance with this, we will no longer be disinfecting the pews between masses. However, we will continue to clean the church each week more diligently.
- Masks are no longer required to be worn at church if a person is vaccinated. However, realizing that some people may be uncomfortable removing their masks in large crowds, we will maintain a “physical distancing” section in the church for those individuals who wish to utilize such accommodations regardless of their vaccination status. This section will be located on the Ryer Ave side of the church in the middle. Every other pew will be blocked off in this section.
- In all other sections except the “physical distancing” section there are no capacity restrictions and no social distancing.
- All doors of the church will be open for entering and leaving and we will continue to provide hand sanitizer at all doors for those who wish to use it.
- The sign of peace may be offered again. Not everyone may be ready to shake hands, hug, kiss or give the sign of peace in an appropriate way. This should be respected, especially in the “physical distancing” section of the church.
- Communion will continue to be distributed only under the form of the body of Christ until further notice. The preferred method of receiving communion remains in the hand and not on the tongue.
- The holy water fonts will continue to be empty until further notice.
- The choir robes and Eucharistic minister robes should not be used until further notice.

You may have noticed that the following reopening steps have already been implemented.

- Altar servers, lectors and the celebrant will process from the back of the church.
- For the time being Eucharistic Ministers do not need to be in the procession.
- Music books and missals are back in the pews so that the congregation can join in singing the music and participating in the liturgy.
- Ushers should continue to bring the collection into the sacristy and secure it. It is not to be brought up in the offertory procession and placed on the altar.

The lifting of these restrictions after a long year is certainly good news. However some people may not feel comfortable returning to pre-pandemic activities in the same way. This should be respected. Our hope is that people will feel safe and return to church. I want to thank all for cooperating with the restrictions that were in place for the past year.

One thing is clear, the pandemic has changed the way we relate to each other and certainly has changed the way our parish has functioned in the past. The world has learned much more about how to communicate with each other and how to congregate safely. Many studies have indicated that the pandemic will change parish life and things will not return to the way they were before the pandemic in most parishes. I tend to agree with this. The normal way parish ministries operated in the past might not be possible now because of space limitations, parking limitations and safety concerns. In moving forward we will have to look at the reality that as we re-open things will be different.

For this reason the parish council and parish staff is organizing an important gathering for all parishioners who wish to plan for the future of our parish the evenings of July 19 – 23 (Monday – Friday). During this time we hope to spend some time in prayer, some time on developing a parish mission statement and begin to look at how we can involve more parishioners. We need to envision how we want to move forward so that our parish can continue to meet the new and existing needs of our neighborhood and parish. We will listen, talk and decide. As much as possible this meeting will be bi-lingual so that all parishioners feel welcome. More details about this gathering will be announced in the coming weeks. For now, mark your calendars and plan on attending as many of the evenings as you can.

Again, thanks you for all you do to make our parish one of the best in the Bronx. It has been a difficult year for many but we can now plan for the future and move forward. May God bless our efforts.

Fr Mike