

Editorial: Navigating new COVID guidelines as a Church

We could all use a little help coping these days.

The psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been a point of concern since early last year when we first were collectively learning the phrase “social distancing.” And it has played out as anticipated, with scientists reporting this spring a global “surge” in depression and anxiety since the pandemic’s beginning. Feelings of stress, loneliness, emptiness and indifference also have been common.

More widely reported side effects have included a lack of concentration, a lack of energy, difficulty sleeping and unhealthy eating habits.

Numbers, though, at least in the United States, continue to trend in the right direction. On May 17, the seven-day average of reported daily cases was right around 32,000 for the first time since June 2020. Recorded deaths are at their lowest point since July 2020. These are all reasons for rejoicing.

But, given new guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, we may be facing additional psychological strife.

The new guidelines, which you certainly by now know, stated that fully vaccinated individuals no longer have to wear masks indoors or outdoors in most situations, mean that Americans are trying to grapple with new behaviors and expectations. The same is true for Catholics, who are now facing all sorts of new general and particular questions. Just think about choirs at Mass. Parish staff might be wondering: Is it safe for choirs to return? Or to hold choir practice without masks? Are we going to require individuals to show proof of vaccination before we gather together so as to not put the whole group at

risk? Is that infringing upon their privacy, freedom or healthcare choices? If there is someone who we know isn't vaccinated and who refuses to wear a mask, how do we kindly ask him or her to put on a mask even if others aren't wearing them, or at least to keep a distance?

Think about the stress facing parents in some dioceses that have chosen to lift requirements for mask wearing and social distancing for Masses. Over the past year, they may have gotten to the point where they felt comfortable attending Mass with certain restrictions in place. Now, in some places, those restrictions are gone. And while the parents might be fully vaccinated, their children – at least below age 12 – aren't. The result might be more stress and anxiety for parents trying to figure out what to do now. "I am trying not to lose my sanity, but it is getting so difficult," one mother recently commented.

Think about Catholic elementary schools that will be starting a new school year in the fall with children both above the age of 12 (the current threshold for vaccination eligibility) and below it. Think about Catholic businesses that have to navigate whether or not to require proof of vaccination. The examples go on and on, and only serve to add further burdens to our psyches.

For the Church, though the particulars and the details may seem complicated, there's one guiding force that can assist us, and that is the one that has been guiding us all along: the love of our neighbor and the obligation to serve the common good.

The Body of Christ is once again given the opportunity to model what that love looks like during this pandemic – and this is true for both those who have chosen to be vaccinated and those who haven't. Those who choose to get vaccinated ought to use their "protected status" to assist those who are more vulnerable and need our care. Those who choose not to get

vaccinated ought to embrace wearing masks and continuing to social distance. If we can find a way to work together, the Church can model what it looks like to respect individual freedoms but still put love of neighbor and service to the common good where it should be: that is, at the heart of our Christian life.

We could all use a little help coping these days. Why not work together as a Church to navigate these new guidelines in a way that reduces anxiety and stress for the faithful, and best maintains the safety of all?

Our Sunday Visitor Editorial Board: Gretchen R. Crowe, Scott P. Richert, Scott Warden, York Young