

With safety in mind, dioceses look to reopen church doors

The next time you go to Mass, someone wearing a medical protective mask may take your temperature and ask if you have a sore throat or shortness of breath.

You may see every other pew roped off to keep the faithful 6 feet apart from each other. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers could be located throughout the building. The seating capacity will probably be reduced, so not everyone who wants to go to church may be allowed inside.

“It’s not a matter of just unlocking the doors and saying, ‘Come in.’ There are a lot of steps that have to be in place to ensure the proper spacing,” said Bishop Michael W. Warfel of Great Falls-Billings, Montana, which resumed public Masses on April 26.

After speaking with pastors about how the first weekend back to public Masses went, Bishop Warfel told *Our Sunday Visitor* that they reported their parishioners seemed to struggle the most with the enforced social distancing.

“The most natural thing in the world is to be with each other,” Bishop Warfel said. “It’s strange to be Church and not be with people close together.”

Easing restrictions

As more governors begin talking about reopening their states, most of which have been shut down for almost two months because of the coronavirus pandemic, a growing number of the nation’s Catholic bishops are looking to bring back public Masses, albeit with restrictions.

“Proper distancing, all must wear a mask, holy Communion only

on the hand," Bishop Richard F. Stika of Knoxville, Tennessee, tweeted April 28 in announcing that public Masses in his diocese will return on Pentecost weekend.

By late April, the dioceses of Great Falls-Billings and Helena in Montana, as well as Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Lubbock, Texas, had resumed public Masses, but with conditions that limited the number of people who could attend the liturgies and that mandated the gatherings still comply with public health regulations aimed at stemming the pandemic.

In Great Falls-Billings, for example, social distancing has to be maintained at all times. The sign of peace is prohibited, as is receiving Communion on the tongue. The offertory procession is not held, the precious blood is not available to the faithful and baskets are not used for collections.

"We've asked the churches to have designated areas to ensure the spacing, either with a rope or ribbon," Bishop Warfel said. "Some are still working it all out. Not all the churches are open yet. Some will be better prepared this weekend. For others, it will take a few weeks."

The restrictions will be relaxed over time, as long as new infections don't skyrocket. How long that remains the new normal is anyone's guess.

"It's going to be there for another 12-18 months until we get good herd immunity, vaccination and anti-viral treatments," said Dr. Renuga Vivekanandan, an associate professor of medicine at Creighton University's School of Medicine in Nebraska.

Vivekanandan, an infectious disease specialist who teaches epidemiology, told Our Sunday Visitor that until effective therapies and vaccines are developed, Mass-goers will need to take precautions like staying home if they are feeling sick or have a temperature greater than 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit, as well as wearing masks and staying 6 feet away from other

worshippers.

Those who are the most vulnerable to the coronavirus – the elderly and those with weakened immune systems or underlying health conditions – will be encouraged to stay home even when public Masses begin. The dioceses that have resumed public liturgies still dispense the faithful from the Sunday Mass obligation.

‘Informed by data’

In the coming weeks and months, more bishops will be announcing the return of public Masses as they consult with public health officials and their own advisers. Jim Lundholm-Eades, a senior consultant for the Leadership Roundtable, said it will be important for bishops to have advisers with the expertise needed for them to make decisions about reopenings that are “mission-driven and data-informed.”

“Some of the decisions a bishop needs to make won’t be for the whole of the diocese. The reopening will be staggered as it’s informed by data,” said Lundholm-Eades, who told Our Sunday Visitor that parts of some territorially large dioceses may reopen before others based on new coronavirus infections and available hospital beds.

Jesuit Father Michael Rozier, an assistant professor of health management and policy at Saint Louis University’s College for Public Health and Social Justice, told Our Sunday Visitor that the bishops’ decisions to ease restrictions should be made based on a particular region’s readiness, health care system and infection rates.

“So we should be making the modifications based on how many new infections there are, how overwhelmed are the hospitals, do they have the capacity for a surge in cases, is there robust testing and contact tracing to prevent new infections,” said Father Rozier, who noted that some states have better

public health infrastructure than others.

“This might motivate people who want to get back to Mass, as I think we all do, to help advocate for the kind of infrastructure that is necessary,” Father Rozier said, adding that a community’s coronavirus data will also dictate some liturgical changes.

In the early phases of reopening, some churches may only have a single cantor, no choir, and may ask the faithful to refrain from singing because there is evidence that singing expels the virus more powerfully. Those restrictions may be relaxed in subsequent phases, but Father Rozier said to not be surprised if they are brought back if local infections begin to climb.

Looking ahead

There will be more long-term changes for parishes. Because of the pandemic’s crippling effect on the economy and revenues, Lundholm-Eades of the Leadership Roundtable said that bishops and pastors need to start preparing their people for the reality that not every parish or ministry “will survive the COVID-19 experience.”

“Some of the things that the parishes and dioceses are doing are more mission-critical than others,” Lundholm-Eades said. “They need to focus initially on those things that are mission-critical and not try to restore everything that was there before.”

Lundholm-Eades added that Church officials will also need to be vigilant in following the guidelines of medical experts, the White House Coronavirus Task Force and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“As things open up, pay attention to what the experts are saying and don’t ignore it, or there will be consequences,” Lundholm-Eades said. “God willing, we’ll get beyond that, but right now, that’s the way it is.”

Bishop Warfel said he reinstated public Masses based on guidance from Montana's public health authorities and after consulting his council of diocesan priests.

"Proportionally, we have the smallest number of (coronavirus) cases in the United States," Bishop Warfel said. "Here we have counties where there have never been any recorded cases of COVID-19."

With fewer than 500 total cases and 15 deaths, the pandemic as of late April had not hit Montana, one of the country's least-populated states, as hard as New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts or Illinois. But that does not mean that Bishop Warfel or his counterpart in Helena are not monitoring the situation.

Said Bishop Warfel, "This is the new normal until we have some dissipation and some lessening of the concern of the virus spreading."

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.