

Parishes Opening for Public Worship

I am pleased to share with you that as of **August 7th** the majority of our parishes have the option to open once again for limited public worship. As this situation is evolving each community must understand that these protocols can evolve as this public health crisis evolves. The following points are especially significant in this goal as we move forward:

- Parishes located on lands associated with Native American Nations will follow the public health protocols and directives of their proper Tribal Government. Also, the parishes located in **Yuma County** and **Santa Cruz County** are delayed until August 21st, at the earliest, for the option of reopening. As of July 28, 2020, the Covid-19 positivity rate for much of southern Arizona is under ten percent. However, the positivity rate in Yuma County is **17.5%**, and Santa Cruz County is at **25.3%**. While a substantial portion of the concentrations of Coronavirus can be attributed to area nursing homes, detention centers and prisons, the virus in the general population of these counties cannot be entirely discounted. In Yuma County, for instance, the Arizona Health Department lists “workplace exposure” as the #1 cause of infection. Parishes in these locations remain free to distribute Holy Communion outdoors to their parishioners or to celebrate outdoor Masses, as is currently permitted. It is my great hope that after an additional delay of two to three weeks these communities can safely offer indoor celebrations as well.
- The risks associated with public gatherings have not decreased and the formal Dispensation from participating in Sunday Mass in person remains in place for all persons living in or visiting the Diocese of Tucson. To state the obvious, we do not have a working vaccine or perfect method of treatment for Covid-19. It is my recommendation that the faithful remain at home until this situation is somewhat safer. I urge the faithful to commit daily to a time of prayer but most especially on Sundays. I also strongly encourage the reception of Holy Communion outdoors at your parish after prayerfully observing a Mass on television or the internet. While this public health situation remains troubling I must recall that our original motivation to cease public indoor gatherings was the extraordinarily high patient census in our hospitals, especially Intensive Care Units. That situation has improved. As of July 28th, hospitalization rates due to Covid-19 for Arizona have dropped 37% from their peak on July 13th. As our hospitals are reporting greater capacity, and I anticipate that only a small portion of our Catholic population will return for public Masses at this time, I conclude that limited indoor public Masses have once again become a possibility for much of our Diocese.
- No parish in the approved areas of our Diocese is required to reopen for public indoor Masses. The decision to reopen resides with the parish Pastor (or parish Administrator), in consultation with his local advisors. I urge pastors, whether open for public indoor Masses or not, to provide times for the faithful to come in person and receive Holy Communion outdoors. I also urge that those identified in the Center for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines as highly at risk to refrain from in-person participation at Masses. This includes persons with chronic health conditions as well as persons age 65 and older.

- For those parishes that elect to open, they must return to those protocols observed just prior to the recent suspension of public indoor Masses. Pastors are to review the protocols previously approved by my delegate for this purpose, Msgr. Al Schifano. This applies to Mass, other Sacraments (including Confession), parish meetings, celebrations, etc. There may be no adaptation or variance from the approved prior protocols with the exception of the protocols listed immediately below.
- Pastors are reminded that they may celebrate Masses beginning on Fridays and continuing through Mondays—with those Masses always making use of the Sunday Mass prayers and Scripture readings. Holy Communion may never be given indoors; it is to be given to the faithful only outdoors, even for those who have attended a Mass in person, and only provided in the hand. Receiving Holy Communion after Mass is over and upon exiting the Church is a way that those who attended Mass in person can be in solidarity with the Community who has observed a Mass by technology and may then be coming to receive Holy Communion at the same time. Any prior permission to distribute Holy Communion indoors is hereby revoked.
- The use of a mask is to protect others and also shows great respect and concern for our priests. It is clearly a pro-life issue. While already listed in approved protocols I wish to remind everyone that face masks are a firm requirement for all persons age six and older. Parishioners with a health condition making it impossible for them to make use of a mask are to contact their parish office ahead of time to verify the health condition with their pastor. There are no other exceptions to this protocol.

I believe that substantial strides are being made in the creation of vaccines as well as better treatments. However, as noted above, the reopening of our parishes for limited indoor public Masses should not signal a lessening of caution or even an encouragement to attend Mass in person at this time. Indeed, as both faithful Catholics and faithful citizens, I urge the faithful to set a good example for the public. The aggressive observance of our protocols gives witness to our love of neighbor, appreciation for those who minister to us, and concern for the most vulnerable of our communities.

Lastly, I once again urge the faithful to enter into a true spirit of prayer, asking Our Lord and His Blessed Mother to intervene quickly, bringing us the vaccine and better medical treatments we need in order to celebrate our faith with far fewer constraints. I also ask for prayers for the sick, as well as for healthcare workers and first-responders. They are powerful witnesses to the love of neighbor.

May God bless you abundantly,

+Edward J. Weisenburger
Bishop of Tucson

July 29, 2020