



Decree for Partial Opening of Churches and Public Worship
Guidelines

Dear Father,

Peace and Grace be with you. The past two months have been challenging for all of us as we faced the coronavirus. It has forced us to discontinue public celebrations of the Eucharist and to change our way of life in many ways. We long for the opportunity to return to Mass, to return to work, to visit the sick and attend to the dying. These times have truly helped us to appreciate our parish families and those who serve us so generously.

As you are well aware, our North Country Region has been reopened and we have been working diligently to prepare to reopen our churches for public worship. The placement of houses of worship in the State's New York Forward Plan was originally in phase 4. At present, houses of worship are allowed by the State to reopen for religious services for congregations of ten or less people. Additionally, as set forth in this decree, **pastors must obtain my permission prior to reopening their churches for public Mass.**

The good news is that the precautionary measures we have taken the past several months have reduced the number of COVID-19 cases. This good news is tempered by the great suffering and the large loss of life caused by the virus. While the situation is improving, the danger is not completely gone. We have to be vigilant as we move forward, to assure that we keep our people safe as we resume our public worship and other activities.

As Catholics, we know that Christian worship and sacraments are essential for the well-being of the human person. The challenges presented by this pandemic have highlighted just how essential our faith is – far more important than many commercial activities that are now permitted. The faithful are seeking the Eucharist, Confession and the Anointing of the Sick in this time of great sickness, isolation and anxiety. We know that the Eucharist is the source of our strength, unity and spiritual nourishment, and is needed now more than ever. The grace and comfort offered by the Sacraments is more than essential.

To help us re-open our churches and resume public worship, we rely on the guidance of the New York State Department of Health's instructions and the guidance of our local public health officials. I am deeply indebted to Dr. Dana McGuire and Dr. Andrew Williams, of the St. Lawrence County Health Department for their guidance and advice in forming this plan for re-opening. Their generous contributions to the formulation of this plan give me assurance that as we move forward toward more normal worship and parish life, we are doing so in a manner that is responsible and safe. Nothing worthwhile is completely without risk, but we have to responsibly manage risks as we implement and monitor our plan. We must always bear in mind that a new outbreak of the virus as we re-open could cause a return to the more restrictive measures we had during the New York on Pause Order. Please impress upon your parishioners that their cooperation with the precautions and procedures outline in our plan will help us attain the outcome we seek.

I am also indebted to members of our committee for reopening our parishes: Dr. Tracy LaFlair, Dr. Lisa Brietenbach, Rita Crowley, RNP, Sandy Lyons, RN, Nancy Levac, RN, and Father Bryan Stitt for their input and work on the plan. It is nice to have a team of professionals to guide us in these complex matters.

The re-opening of our churches and return to public worship will be measured and gradual. **These guidelines are effective immediately and will remain in effect until updated guidelines are issued.** Your cooperation with our guidelines will be greatly appreciated. This decree incorporates by reference Part III of *Guidelines on Sacraments and Pastoral Care*, Phased Restoration of Public Masses (“Mass Guidelines”) , which can be found on the website of the Thomistic Institute at <https://thomisticinstitute.org/covid-sacraments>. These Mass Guidelines were previously distributed to you. Where there are differences between the documents found at the Thomistic Institute and this decree, the provisions of this decree shall be followed in the Diocese of Ogdensburg.

Based on the recommendations of church leaders, the Thomistic Institute, public health officials and members of our team, I am issuing the following guidelines for the re-opening of our churches and public worship.

1. Attendance will be limited.

- a. As a preliminary matter, a priest who is at high risk or has a respiratory infection of any kind should avoid celebrating public Masses or administering the Sacraments during this phase. The same holds true for those who will be assisting at Mass (e.g. deacons, servers, lectors, sacristans and ushers.)
- b. Gatherings will be limited to the number of persons mandated by governmental regulations, guidelines or recommendations. At the present time, the State New York Forward Plan and Governor Cuomo’s executive orders limit attendance at religious services to ten or fewer people. Federal guidelines state that a church can hold gatherings larger than 10 persons, **provided it can provide for strict social distancing. At present, attendance at public Masses and other religious gathers will be limited to ten persons or less.** Each parish should determine the maximum number of attendees that can be accommodated in their church(es), implementing strict social distancing. In that way, we will be prepared to accommodate more attendees at public Mass when it is determined that we may do so. **Pastors should not increase the size of congregations at Mass beyond the number specified in the permissions I grant. When larger congregations are allowed, I will amend my written permissions to reflect the size of the congregation permitted.**
- c. Encourage those who are at higher risk from the virus to stay home.
- d. Encourage those who are feeling sick or anyone with a cough of any sort not to come to church for Mass or any visit. Anyone exhibiting the symptoms of infection (fever of 99.6 or higher, cough, headache, sore throat, shortness of breath, fatigue, loss of taste or smell, unexplained body aches) or who had contact with anyone diagnosed with or who has symptoms of COVID-19, should remain home.
- e. Each parish will assure that the number of persons attending public worship do not exceed the appropriate limit. For examples of how this may be done, please see the Mass Guidelines [e.g. more frequent celebrations, first-come, first served, rotation system based on first letter or parishioners’ last name].
- f. Non-household members are to sit at least six feet from each other.
- g. Locations that have historically had outdoor Masses may continue to do so, provided that all social distancing protocols are strictly followed. Locations that have not had outdoor Masses may not hold outdoor Masses at this time.

2. Screening may be provided.

- a. Each parish may wish to assure that participants in public worship will be screened, if possible. Such screening will consist of questions to ascertain risks of infection and non-contact temperature screening by medical professionals (nurses, doctors, EMTs). If screening shows a person has a temperature or other symptom of infection, those conducting the screening should be prepared to suggest appropriate follow-up for that person.

3. Social Distancing will be Practiced.

- a. All persons, age 2 and older, attending Mass will be asked to wear a mask throughout the liturgy.
- b. For communion, stay at least six feet back from the person in front of you. For suggestions on how to implement social distancing, see Mass Guidelines, (“Strict Physical Distancing” on page 5).
- c. Each parish should determine the number and location of communion stations, which should be configured to provide for safe movement of individuals and social distancing. A small table should be placed at each communion station, with an unfolded corporal and a bottle of hand sanitizer.
- d. Each parish shall determine how the distribution of Holy Communion will be safely accomplished in their parish, following one of the options set forth in the Mass Guidelines (see 4. The Distribution of Holy Communion at pp. 7-11.) Strict social or physical distancing must be a priority during the distribution of Holy Communion. **At this time, I strongly recommend that parishioners receive the Eucharist in the hand to reduce the risks to the priest and themselves.** Those who decide to receive on the tongue are asked to receive at the end of the line, and the person distributing Holy Communion should purify his or her hands immediately afterwards. Those preferring to refrain from receiving the Eucharist for concerns associated with Coronavirus are asked to pray an Act of Spiritual Communion.
- e. Distribution of the Chalice will continue to be suspended.
- f. There will be no greetings before or after Mass, holding of hands during Our Father and no exchange of the sign of peace.
- g. Please use designated entrances and exits and follow directions for movement in order to avoid congregating or contact with others. Parishes should post signs directing where to enter and exit church and to indicate one-way travel in designated aisles. Special consideration should be given to individuals who have difficulty walking or need accommodations to enter or leave church.
- h. Encourage parishioners to maintain social distancing everywhere on church property (parking lots, church steps). Ask them to refrain from congregating anywhere in or around the church.
- i. While the number of attendees is limited, pastors may add additional Masses to their weekend schedule to accommodate a greater number of parishioners until further notice. We ask you to respect our policy of priests not celebrating more than three Masses per day.

4. A general dispensation from the Sunday obligation will remain in effect.

- a. All persons who are at risk are asked to stay home for your own protection.
- b. All the faithful are dispensed from the obligation of attending Sunday Mass until further notice.
- c. While there is no obligation to attend Sunday Mass, we encourage all people to grow in their relationship with the Lord, keep holy the Lord's Day, and maintain contact with their parish by prayer and watching the Mass over the internet or on television. A list of live-streamed Masses is available on our diocesan website.

5. Risk still exists for those attending Mass.

- a. Even the best health practices and social distancing cannot remove all risks of contracting or transmitting the coronavirus.
- b. Place hand sanitizer near the entrances of the church and encourage those entering or exiting to perform hand hygiene.
- c. On a regular basis cleaning of our churches must be performed as outlined in the March 12, 2020 Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfection for COVID-19 For House of Worship (attached). This document may be updated from time to time. Updates will be found at the NYS DOH website: www.health.ny.gov.
- d. Missalettes, song books and other common use items should be removed from pews. Consider preparing single use papers with music, readings and prayers to facilitate participation.
- e. Provide reminders to participants about the importance of social distancing and personal hygiene.

These diocesan guidelines are based on CDC and NYS health mandates and recommendations. Each parish must tailor its plan to conform to its location, size, circumstances, and local governmental directives.

Our return to public worship will be gradual. There will be challenges and frustration as we move ahead. Not everyone who wants to attend Mass may be able to do so in early phases. I ask you to be patient. We do not want to contribute to a rebound effect that would negate all the progress that has been made in stopping the spread of this virus. Continuing to follow health guidelines will enable us to resume normal Mass attendance in the near future. Setbacks would push a return to normalcy further into the future. We must put the health and well-being of people ahead of any urge to move too quickly.

Sample parish plans have been distributed to pastors to help them formulate a safe plan that takes into account their particular circumstances. As changes in governmental guidance and requirements occur, I will update permissions to reflect those changes and any adaptations deemed appropriate.

Once pastors have prepared their parish plan, they may request permission to reopen the churches and resume public worship. The request for permission and the attestation that the plan has been implemented is found at this site: <https://pastoral.rcdony.org/home/administration/request> .

Please be deliberate in implementing all precautions and protocols in your parish plan. Encourage your parishioners to follow your parish plan so all of us can remain safe and healthy. Let us seek the intercession

of Saint Joseph, protector of the church, as we resume our public worship. Asking God to bless you abundantly, I am

Faithfully yours in Christ.

+ Terry R. LaValley

Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley
Bishop of Ogdensburg

Decreed at Ogdensburg this
23rd day of May, 2020.

Kevin J. O'Brien

Reverend Kevin J. O'Brien, Witness