



## **Directives for Conducting Public Liturgies in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Updated March 19, 2021**

[Our diocesan directives have been developed and updated in consultation with Catholic infectious disease specialists who participate in the Thomistic Institute's Working Group on Infectious Disease Protocols for Sacraments & Pastoral Care and are members of the Catholic Medical Association.<sup>1</sup>]

Public Masses in the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend have been permitted to resume since the weekend of May 23-24, so long as current diocesan directives are adhered to.

Note that if individual counties or other local governments within the diocese issue more restrictive mandates, these must also be closely followed.

Parishes that are not equipped to implement all the necessary precautions should not celebrate public liturgies.

**In addition, the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass is extended for all Catholics in the diocese until further notice.**

### **STRICT SOCIAL DISTANCING:**

1. The state has not prescribed a specific numerical limit to the number of people who can attend indoor church services. However, social distancing measures must be implemented in every parish to continue to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. According to the state's current executive order, this means that in places of worship, "individuals or households must be spaced at least six feet apart from any other individual or household." Socially distanced seating is therefore the deciding factor for how many can be gathered in a church at one time.

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<sup>1</sup> Primary consultant: Dr. Thomas W. McGovern, M.D. (Catholic Medical Association National Board Member, Former Clinical Research Physician, U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases). Dr. McGovern served as liaison with: Deacon Timothy P. Flanigan, M.D. (Prof. of Medicine, (infectious diseases), Alpert Medical School of Brown University); Dr. Paul Cieslak, M.D. (Medical Director for Communicable Diseases and Immunizations at Oregon Health Authority); Dr. Paul Carson, M.D. (Medical Director of North Dakota State University Center for Immunization Research and Education). [See here](#) for information on the Thomistic Institute.



2. To that end, at least every other pew must be unoccupied, though a pastor may decide – based on his church’s configuration and the distance between pews in his parish church, or for other reasons – to increase the required spacing to every three pews. Consider having at least a portion of pews dedicated to seating in every third pew. Unused pews must be blocked off.

If helpful, pews could be marked with tape to outline 6-foot intervals and help gauge distances for seating.

3. Some sort of oversight will be required to keep track of when a church's socially distanced capacity is reached. At that point, no additional people may be admitted into the church building.

### **OTHER HEALTH PROTOCOLS:**

1. **Masks:** The CDC and the state recommend a combination of both social distancing and wearing masks or other face coverings in public settings, including religious services. As noted by health authorities, the use of masks is not simply for our own protection, but for those around us.

All congregants (except for infants and toddlers and those who would have trouble breathing) must wear such face coverings out of concern for fellow parishioners.

Surgical masks or cloth face coverings may be made available by parishes for members of the faithful to keep and take home.

During the celebration of the liturgy itself, the main celebrant should not wear a mask, except for during those times stipulated below. If other clergy (priests and deacons) are participating, they also would not wear masks unless they cannot be situated at least six feet from each other and any other individuals, at which times they should wear masks/face coverings.

Other ministers (including altar servers) actively assisting in the sanctuary must wear masks or cloth face coverings, since their duties often require being within six feet of other individuals. Everyone in the sanctuary should remain 6 feet apart from one another whenever feasible.



Anyone speaking at the ambo or a podium should not wear a mask or face covering while doing so, and should also be greater than 6 feet from the nearest parishioner.

Clergy should wear masks before and after liturgical celebrations if interacting with the faithful.

(See below under "Distribution of Holy Communion" for mask protocols at Communion.)

2. **Cleaning:** It is recommended that the most high-contact surfaces (such as door handles, crash bars, and pew tops) continue to be cleaned between every Mass or other event in the church.

The infectious disease specialists we consult indicate that using a conventional cleaning solution (rather than more caustic disinfectants) to clean and thoroughly dry these surfaces should be adequate. The CDC has said that airborne transmission poses the highest risk for spreading SARS-CoV-2. Transmission via surfaces is possible but is thought to be rare.

Parishes that wish to continue a more intense disinfecting regimen may do so. This [page from the EPA](#) catalogs cleaning products that claim effectiveness against the coronavirus.

Parishes may wish to be extra careful not to damage the finish on pews or other furnishings by testing on a small section with the cleaners they plan to use. The New Holland pew company suggests the following for cleaning wooden pew parts (while noting that over long periods of time, damage is still possible):

- Fill a spray bottle with 2 cups water, 1 cup white vinegar and about 5 drops of dish soap or mild detergent. The vinegar disinfects, and the dish soap works as an added cleaning element.
- Use a spray bottle to apply a spray mist of this solution onto the wood areas and wipe off with a damp clean rag. Using a damp rag removes traces of the vinegar and soap. Continue across the wood section until the area is cleaned and disinfected.
- Wipe the furniture with a dry clean rag to remove any moisture. Be sure to dispose of any rags and cleaning materials.



Microphones should not be touched, and they should be cleaned/sanitized as needed.

3. Since surface and water-borne transmission are not viewed as common means of viral spread, holy water stoups and baptismal fonts may again be filled, at the discretion of the pastor.
4. As recommended by the state, please make every effort to “place hand sanitizers in high-contact locations (e.g. bathroom, entry, exit) and ask staff, members, and guests to sanitize their hands before entering the building.” (Effective hand sanitizers should have at least 60% alcohol content.) Also ensure that handwashing supplies are properly stocked in parish restrooms.
4. Parish bulletins, worship aids, or other items can be distributed if ushers practice good hygiene.
5. Social gatherings after Mass may only occur if masking and social distancing are maintained. (See below regarding policies for wedding receptions and funeral luncheons.)

### **WHO SHOULD ATTEND:**

1. Reminders should be posted that anyone with a cough or fever, or who may otherwise be feeling sick, should not come to church for Mass or even for a visit.
2. It is still recommended that unvaccinated individuals who are 65 and above or who have an underlying at-risk health condition stay home.
3. All priests, deacons, and others who assist them at Mass should review their own health, screening themselves for symptoms of COVID-19. If any symptoms of illness are present, they must not celebrate or assist at a Mass (unless the priest celebrates Mass by himself).

### **SCHEDULING OF MASSES:**

1. With smaller congregation sizes due to social distancing, consideration can be given to adding Sundays Masses. **Priests of the diocese already have the faculty to celebrated three Masses on a Sunday or Holy Day. If priests find**



**they must celebrate more than three Masses on Sundays and Holy Days, please contact the Vicar General.**

2. Other options to accommodate more of the faithful may be explored. Where feasible, Bishop Rhoades grants permission for Masses to be held outdoors, provided proper reverence and social distancing can be maintained.
3. Parishes might consider ways to spread out attendance at Masses – for example, a rotation system based on the first letter of last names, or an online ticketing system like Eventbrite (<https://www.eventbrite.com/>), etc.
4. Parishes that have been livestreaming their Masses might consider continuing the practice for the benefit of those vulnerable individuals who still cannot attend in person.
5. If there is a localized outbreak of COVID-19 involving a particular community or parish, pastors should immediately consult with the Vicar General about potentially suspending Masses at their parishes.

#### **LITURGICAL MEASURES AND CONSIDERATIONS SURROUNDING MASS:**

1. Plan to schedule only a manageable number of ministers and personnel for Mass, taking into account what social distancing in your church and sanctuary can accommodate.
2. **Singing & Music:** There is evidence that singing, especially in close proximity to others, can increase the risk of viral spread by aerosoling respiratory particles in a manner more akin to coughing or sneezing than mere talking. However, infectious disease experts with whom we consult believe that the risk posed by typical congregational singing is minimal if we universally adhere to the existing mask and distancing requirements. In addition, many dioceses have continued allowing congregational singing (amidst other precautions) during the pandemic without reporting related increases in viral transmission.

**As such, at the discretion of the pastor, normal congregational singing may resume in parishes, as long as the faithful are wearing masks.** Very boisterous singing (along the lines of all-out singing that a choir would do) should still be avoided for the congregation, as quieter singing is associated with lower aerosol production.



**Cantors and choirs, because they engage in more vigorous and forceful singing (which studies indicate emit far more aerosols than talking or quieter singing), must still abide by the existing distancing and masking measures as found below.**

The following options may be utilized to accommodate a cantor at an indoor public Mass:

- Singing (unmasked) with a microphone from an enclosed space – either a room separate from the main body of the church (e.g., repurposed cry room, reconciliation room, unused sacristy) or from an enclosed booth or box specially constructed for this purpose.
- Singing with a mask or face covering, while situated at least 12 feet from any other individual.
- Singing with a face shield or a plexiglass barrier immediately in front of the singer, while situated at least 12 feet from any other individual.
- Singing (unmasked) facing entirely away from the congregation, while situated at least 20 feet from any other individual

A limited parish choir is permitted if all choir members are able to utilize the aforementioned cantor precautions with respect to the congregation and also each other (e.g., no choir member may be closer than 12 feet to another choir member in open space). An exception: if you have a married couple or a family/group of singers who belong to a single household, that group of singers need not distance from each other (but still must strictly abide by distancing from anyone outside their household)

The size and layout of the individual church will dictate how large such a choir can be.

Outdoor singing of all kinds is safe if all singers are six feet apart, and the area is not tented or otherwise enclosed.

Instrumental music provided by organ, piano, string instruments, handbells, etc. is recommended because it does not present the transmission risks potentially associated with woodwind and brass instruments, which can spread aerosols even further than singing. Brass and woodwind can only be safely employed if all applicable player masks and instrument bell covers are used (see here for examples: <https://www.jwpepper.com/sheet-music/musician-personal-protective-gear.list>), along with the same enhanced distancing measures required for cantors



and choir members. (If alone in an enclosed space, mask and bell cover are not necessary.)

If the circumstances recommend it, a parish may still limit singing to just a cantor or a small choir. Or (if a parish is not utilizing hymnals or worship aids, for example) the congregation could sing more familiar parts such as the ordinary of the Mass, while a cantor or small choir sings less familiar hymnody or antiphons.

It also remains acceptable to employ just instrumental music, or to forgo music entirely during this time.

If the congregation is not singing, the acclamations surrounding the Eucharistic Prayer (Sanctus, Memorial Acclamation, Amen) are most properly recited by all. However, these should be sung if congregational singing is restored in a parish.

3. Since surface transmission is not viewed as a common means of viral spread, missalettes and hymnals can again be offered to the congregation, at the discretion of the pastor.
4. Those responsible for preparing the vessels, bread, and wine before Mass should practice good hygiene. Chalices and wine should not be prepared for the people since Communion will only be under the form of bread.
5. Social distancing should be maintained insofar as possible throughout the liturgical action. For the presidential prayers, the priest could place the missal on a stand at the chair or else on the altar, rather than having a server hold the book in close proximity to a priest who is speaking loudly while unmasked.
6. Gift-bearers and an offertory procession may be utilized at the discretion of the pastor. Where this is done, the priest must wear a mask when receiving the gifts from the faithful. All vessels should remain covered until they are brought to the altar.
7. Collection baskets that are passed from person to person still may not be utilized, since it would give the faithful no choice but to handle the baskets. Long-handled baskets held by an usher may be used.
8. The lavabo may be done either by the priest alone or with the assistance of servers, since the priest does not speak loudly at this moment.



9. When hosts for the faithful are consecrated, they could be placed in their own vessels on a separate corporal towards the side of the altar, so that they are not directly in front of the priest as he speaks the Eucharistic Prayer. Additional palls may be placed over those elements at the appropriate times, if desired.
10. All should refrain from holding hands during the Our Father, if this is a custom. The Sign of Peace should not be given by the customary handshake. It could be exchanged without physical contact – for example, by a bow of the head. Or it can be omitted altogether.
11. The person responsible for the care of the vessels after Mass is to ensure that they are thoroughly cleaned. After being purified according to the rubrics, Mass vessels are to be carefully cleaned with hot, soapy water.

#### **DISTRIBUTION OF HOLY COMMUNION:**

1. The distribution of Holy Communion to the faithful should continue to take place at the normal time during Mass.
2. If needed, the priest may explain to the assembly the procedure and expectations for the distribution of Communion.
3. The distribution of the Precious Blood to the people remains suspended. Concelebrating priests may receive by intinction or via a separate chalice.
4. Clergy who are in a higher-risk group may opt to refrain from distributing Communion, in which case other clergy might distribute in their place – or Communion may be distributed solely by extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion who are not in the higher-risk group if necessary.
5. During the distribution of Holy Communion, clergy and extraordinary ministers must wear masks or face coverings. They should also use hand sanitizer immediately before distributing Communion (and after applying any facial coverings).
6. A distance of 6 feet should be maintained between individuals or family units in the Communion procession. If feasible, a parish might optionally offer hand sanitizer to those coming forward in the Communion procession.



7. Gloves should not be worn by anyone distributing or receiving Holy Communion. If those distributing Communion follow prescribed hand hygiene before fulfilling their role, then gloves are unnecessary and offer no additional safeguards to those receiving Communion. Using tongs or other instruments to attempt to distribute Communion is prohibited, due to how easily the hosts could be dropped.
8. Receiving Communion on the tongue remains an option, but it may be discouraged because it does involve an increased risk of contamination.

If giving Communion on the tongue, ministers must take special care not to touch any part of the communicant's mouth. If ministers sense that they have touched the tongue or mouth of the communicant, they should purify their fingers in an ablution cup and then wash or sanitize their hands before continuing with Communion. A further possibility would be to ask those who wish to receive Communion on the tongue to present themselves for Communion in a separate line or after all others have received.

9. Communion in the hand is also a potential means of transmission, so every effort must be made to avoid hand-to-hand contact. If ministers sense that hand-to-hand contact has been made, they should purify their fingers in an ablution cup and then wash or sanitize their hands before continuing with Communion.
10. It should not be necessary for ministers to use hand sanitizer between each communicant if actual person-to-person contact has not occurred.
11. Physical contact should not be made with a communicant who comes forward for words of blessing.
12. All ordinary and extraordinary ministers should purify their fingers and use hand sanitizer after distributing Communion.

### **SACRAMENTS & OTHER LITURGICAL RITES:**

1. **Baptisms, weddings, and funerals may continue**, incorporating all the applicable social distancing, health protocols, and liturgical measures noted above.

At weddings, the bride and groom are not required to wear masks or face coverings. Wedding pictures must follow aforementioned social distancing and



health protocols.

Wedding receptions and funeral luncheons may be hosted at parishes, provided all current state requirements for social gatherings are adhered to (including maximum gathering size or capacity limits, social distancing, and required face coverings).

2. **Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament** may be scheduled, following all applicable stipulations noted above.
3. **Confession:** Confessions may be held at scheduled times.

For individual confessions, when there is no large, solid barrier between priest and penitent (such as a screen built into a wall with cloth covering the grate), masks must be worn by both priest and penitent and six feet of distance must be maintained.

Confessions may be heard outdoors. If indoors, it is recommended that a large room or open area be utilized – generally, traditional confessional boxes or booths cannot be safely utilized at this time.

However, if particular confessional booths have adequate ventilation (such as fresh air coming in and exhaust fan pulling air out, or an open window) and have adequate barriers between the priest and penitent, it may be possible to utilize them. Social distancing should also be observed by those in confession lines.

Whether indoors or outdoors, the secrecy of the confession must be maintained.

No one else should be near enough to hear the confession.

4. **Baptisms:** Social distancing must be maintained during the rites insofar as possible. All in attendance, including the priest or deacon, the elect, and godparents must wear masks or face coverings, except little children and those who have trouble breathing.

Per the CDC, currently “there is no evidence that COVID-19 can spread to people through recreational water.” By extension, immersion or wading in a baptismal pool is therefore permitted, so long as the individual or the parents of the one being baptized are comfortable with it.



If an individual or family would prefer that baptism occur with fresh water, the water should be blessed in an individual vessel and then poured over the candidate's head into the font. If there are multiple baptisms in this scenario, fresh water is poured each time. If it seems advisable, before each subsequent baptism, the water in the font could be reverently emptied.

During infant baptisms, the oil of catechumens and the sacred chrism may be conferred with cotton balls, and the ephphatha should be omitted.

5. **Confirmations:** Please note that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has clarified that the use of an instrument such as gloves or a cotton swab during the conferral of Confirmation does not affect the validity of the sacrament. Therefore, when Confirmations do occur anytime during this pandemic, the chrism may be applied in such a manner. If chrism is applied by hand, it may be advisable to sanitize the thumb between each Confirmation. Chrism and any instruments used to apply it should be reverently disposed of or burned. The minister and candidates should wear masks throughout the conferral of Confirmation.
6. **First Communion:** First Communicants should not receive from the chalice this year, and social distancing must be maintained at all times among the First Communicants (including for any photographs of the class).
7. **Pastoral Care of the Sick & Homebound:** No one with symptoms of illness should visit the sick or homebound. The proper precautionary measures (including thorough hand washing and social distancing) must be followed in any visits to the sick or homebound.

The protocols and directives of hospitals, nursing homes, and other health care facilities must be followed in pastoral visits to the sick, including the use of masks, gloves, or gowns. Appropriate precautions should be taken when visiting the sick in their homes, especially if the sick person has or is suspected to have COVID-19. In such cases, the priest may use a cotton-tipped swab or a cotton ball in anointing the sick person. The cotton should be burned or buried after use.

Keep in mind that anointing cannot validly be conferred unless the priest himself applies the oil of the sick to the patient. A nurse (for example) cannot do it for him.



Proper precautions should also be taken in hearing confessions and giving Holy Communion during pastoral visits to the sick. Again, priests are to follow the directives of our local and state health officials when ministering to persons with COVID-19. Keep in mind that quarantine may be required if the proper protocols are not followed.

No unvaccinated priest who is over 60 years of age or who has two or more chronic illnesses (the high-risk group for more serious problems if the coronavirus is contracted) should visit or minister the sacraments to a patient with COVID-19. If an unvaccinated priest in this condition is contacted to minister in such a situation, he should ask another priest without this restriction to minister to such a patient.