



May 1, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I remain grateful for your commitment even in these difficult days to give joyful witness to the Resurrection of Jesus. I deeply appreciate the sacrifices that you have been making so that we as the Catholic community can give concrete witness to our respect for human life, and tend to the physical and spiritual well-being of our brothers and sisters.

With the extension of Governor Walz's Stay-at-Home Order until May 18, the public celebration of Mass in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis will continue to be suspended until that date.

The Bishops of Minnesota gathered yesterday after the governor's news conference to carefully consider our own phased approach back into having public Masses. We recognize that when we return to public Masses, we will have to do so with carefully defined protocols in order to keep people safe and to prevent the spread of the virus. We know that if we work together we can do this safely.

We need to begin now to work with our priests and parish leaders so that we could be ready to begin some limited public Masses on May 18. We are developing a gradual, multi-phase approach to the return to public worship. We are in phase one right now. Phase two will allow us to begin some public Masses, and phase three would allow us to have larger gatherings. These phases will allow for the ability to re-evaluate the process as necessary in order to ensure the health and safety of the community going forward. Our plan presumes that throughout the state the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation will continue until such a time that it is safe for all to return.

All phases of this plan require following strict guidelines for social distancing and sanitization.

- Those over age 65 will be strongly encouraged not to attend, and anyone showing any symptoms of sickness, or anyone who has a household member who is sick or showing symptoms of sickness should not come to church.
- The church space will be thoroughly sanitized before and after each service, including all entryways and doors. Holy water fonts will be empty and hymnals removed.
- Signs will be posted concerning social distancing and sanitation requirements and reminders to follow these requirements will be offered.
- Hand sanitizers will be available at all entryways.
- All local safety orders specifically relating to proper face coverings will be followed.
- People will be instructed not engage in any physical touch, such as by greeting each other.
- Signs and other instructions will encourage normal safe practices necessary to avoid the spread (e.g. cough or sneeze into a shirtsleeve, handkerchief, or tissue; avoid touching the eyes, nose, and mouth).

- Ventilation will be increased as much as possible by opening windows and doors, as weather permits.

While we are in phase one, our churches can be open daily for prayer, and priests can provide for adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as they are able. Confessions can happen in spaces that are well-ventilated with adequate social distancing, yet still assuring the privacy of the sacrament. Many parishes have held confessions outdoors, which can work well. It is also permissible to celebrate weddings or funerals with 10 people or fewer present. Outdoor Masses without the distribution of Holy Communion, including benediction where people remain in their cars, minimizing the danger of spreading infection, are also allowed.

We anticipate beginning phase two on May 18. We will be working with public officials in a collaborative way to meet that goal. During phase two, public Masses in churches will be allowed in smaller groups limited to no more than 1/3 of the seating capacity of the Church (approximately every 3rd pew). Parishes are always required to observe the prevailing directives for social distancing between those not of the same household.

Parishes will need to develop ways to ensure that this capacity limit is strictly followed, such as by implementing online signups and having ushers in place to ensure crowds are limited and controlled. Since the Sunday obligation has been dispensed, Catholics will be encouraged to attend other Masses during the week instead of on Sunday, in order to spread out the numbers. More Masses than usual will need to be offered in some cases to accommodate everyone who desires to attend Mass during this phase.

We intend to provide detailed protocols to be followed for the celebration of Mass and the distribution of Holy Communion well in advance of the date when public Masses will resume, so that parishes can make preparations for the careful way we will have to move forward. Social gatherings and other small group meetings will not be allowed during phase two, since they do not have the same controlled movement as Mass. Some other sacramental celebrations may be allowed, but they may never exceed 1/3 of the seating capacity of the church. If a liturgical celebration or event cannot maintain the capacity and other social distancing requirements, it may not take place during this phase.

At this point it is unknown when we would be able to enter phase three, which would provide more opportunity for us to have larger celebrations. We will continue to evaluate and follow the guidance of civil authorities and public health experts.

Please continue to pray for our brothers and sisters who have died from COVID-19, for those who mourn them, for those who are sick from this disease and for the people who are caring for them, often at great risk to themselves and their families. Know of my prayers for them and for you and your loved ones.

As we enter into this month of May, I offer my prayers for each of you through our Blessed Mother, Consoler of the Afflicted, and remain,

Sincerely in Christ,



Most Reverend Bernard A. Hebda
Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis