



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH
THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Pastoral Letter

To All Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Men and Women,
and Faithful Laity of the Diocese of Fort Worth

September 25, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

On August 15, 2020, the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary, His Eminence, Robert Cardinal Sarah, Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of Sacraments, released a letter written to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church. The letter, entitled “Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy,” concerns the celebration of the Liturgy during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In this letter, Cardinal Sarah emphasizes the importance of being physically present for the public celebration of the Eucharist, especially on Sundays.

As your bishop, I would like to thank you once again for the efforts that all of you have made in patience and generosity during these past five months since the weekend of **May 2-3, 2020**, when we in the Diocese of Fort Worth returned to the public celebration of Mass and sacraments with the adaptation of several restrictions and protocols for the sake of the safety of all. Throughout these last five months of the public celebration of Mass, so many of you have responded to your baptismal vocation by generously giving of yourselves to your neighbor in so many ways to facilitate our full and active participation in extraordinary circumstances. You have generously inconvenienced yourselves by wearing face coverings at Mass, serving as ushers, maintaining social distancing, receiving Holy Communion exclusively in the hand, generously donating for the works of charity, and ever more frequent hand-washing and sanitizing. Many of you have had to make the safe but painful decision to stay home from Sunday Mass so as not to spread the virus among the more vulnerable.

We are now entering the annual flu season. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has compounded the threat of widespread illness, especially among the more vulnerable. Therefore, I am directing that you maintain our current but provisional norms and protocols as established last June until further notice. These are temporary protocols and norms given during this time of pandemic. These norms and measures that I promulgate for the safeguarding of the community and the public celebration of Mass will expire when, after consultation, we judge the situation to return to normal. Here are the following temporary protocols and norms in the Diocese of Fort Worth:

1. The faithful in the Diocese of Fort Worth are still dispensed from the obligation to attend and to participate in Sunday Mass. If you are sick or exhibiting symptoms of any illness, stay home. If you are over the age of 60, I am strongly encouraging you not to attend Mass. If your parish can provide a Mass exclusively for people over the age of 60, I recommend that you attend that Mass. I am strongly recommending that people over 60 years of age not distribute Holy Communion for the sake of their own health.

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2. Mindful of the obligation of charity to our neighbor, I am requiring that people in attendance at Mass wear masks over their mouth and nose while inside the church to help prevent the spread of the virus. This is not simply a strong recommendation. People will not be seated without wearing a mask. We must err on the side of caution and of protecting those who are most vulnerable to the dangerous effects of COVID-19 out of an authentic love for our neighbor—a love that befits the selfless love of Christ extended to us in the gift of the Eucharist. If you do not desire to wear a mask for any reason, please stay home and you are invited to follow the Mass by live-streaming.
3. Children under the age of two (2-years-old) are not required to wear masks in keeping with CDC recommendations: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/about-face-coverings.html>
4. The church building will be wiped down with disinfectant in between all masses. Hymnals and other worship aids are not to be present or used at Mass. Collection plates will not be passed or handled among people. Holy Communion will not be shared under both species (no reception of the chalice). There is to be no exchange of a handshake for the sign of peace.
5. Holy Communion will only be distributed in the hand during this time of pandemic. This is to protect the health of all involved.
6. If possible, please do not forget to maintain your stewardship and to support your parish financially.
7. These same protocols and occupancy limitations apply in the Diocese of Fort Worth to the celebration of weddings, funerals, and baptisms for the sake of the safety and good health of all involved.
8. Please continue to notify your parish of any family members or friends who are shut-ins and who desire a pastoral visit.
9. While the Governor has recognized that religious services are not subject to occupancy limits, we have a higher duty to our faith in God in continuing to abide by sound health and safety protocols. Therefore, after consultation with public health and civic officials and having received reports of an upturn in cases, I judge that we maintain our current occupancy standard. The number of people who are to be in attendance at Mass will be limited to a number that can be safely present mindful of the recommendation of 50% capacity with social distancing, the required protocols of masks and sanitizing of hands, and receiving Holy Communion exclusively in the hand.

The distance of **THREE FEET** between persons generally equates to 50% capacity of the church building. Couples and families may be seated together as they normally would, with three feet distance separating them from others seated in church. Upon entering church at the designated entrance, people, wearing masks or scarf coverings over their mouth and nose, will have their hands sanitized and be escorted by an usher to a seat in the church. Once the church building has reached capacity, people arriving cannot be admitted and will be invited to attend another Mass, or directed to a parish hall, if available, arranged for social distancing and with live streaming. As attendance continues to grow, please consult with your neighboring parishes before adding temporarily a new Mass to the parish schedule.

10. Thank you for the extraordinary generosity that you have displayed in donating non-perishable food items and gift cards to your local parish so that they can be distributed through food banks and other outreach services in our parishes and local communities. Please, if you are able, continue to do so and to remember Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW) as the ordinary means of delivery for care and services to the poor and those who are most in need. There will be an ongoing and growing need for these works of mercy from the faithful throughout our path to recovery. Please do not forget to maintain your stewardship and to support

your parish financially, through direct giving or the mail.

11. For other gatherings, religious education classes, and meetings, please consult the memorandum from the Vicar General sent to parishes on September 11, 2020.
12. Catholic schools are to follow the policies established and approved by the Office of the Superintendent of Catholic Schools. There are to be no exceptions.
13. While many nursing homes have opened with limited visitation, please arrange visits to the infirm and elderly with an abundance of caution. Priests should still anoint with cotton stock. Priests should shave their beards or keep them trimmed to maintain a tight and effective seal for the fitting of the face mask to prevent the spread of contagion.

As Cardinal Sarah stated in his letter, “A sure principle in order not to err is obedience. Obedience to the norms of the Church, obedience to the Bishops. In times of difficulty (e.g., wars, pandemics), Bishops and Episcopal Conferences can give provisional norms which must be obeyed. Obedience safeguards the treasure entrusted to the Church.” The USCCB has left it to the discretion of the local bishop to determine such norms. I have done so after due consultation with our priests, deacons, staff, civic officials, and experts in medicine and public health.

Please remember that we are walking together on a challenging path to recovery as sons and daughters of the Resurrection. With God’s Grace, we are more than able to accomplish this. Please continue to pray for those most affected by the COVID-19 virus, especially those who have suffered economic hardship and loss of employment. Pray for a safe vaccine. Pray for the men and women who serve our community in government, in police and firefighting, in hospitals and nursing homes, in our military, in our food preparation and delivery services, for our priests and deacons, and for the poor and those most in need. With every good wish I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ Michael F. Olson

Most Reverend Michael F. Olson, STD, MA
Bishop of Fort Worth

E. James Hart

Reverend Msgr. E. James Hart
Chancellor

