



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

January 13, 2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

I write to you amidst what public health professionals have identified as the peak of the rapid spread of the COVID-19 Omicron (“O”) variant along with the height of the flu season in North Texas. While the effects of the “O” variant seem to be less virulent than the previous strains of COVID—especially for the unvaccinated—nonetheless this variant is spreading rapidly through our community with greater contagion. I am writing to you to encourage you to be prudent and mindful of our protocols with renewed vigilance for safe participation in the celebration of Mass and the other sacraments especially during these next several weeks.

First, I would like to emphasize to you that if one feels sick or experiencing symptoms of COVID or the flu, it is imperative that one stay home and not come to Mass that day. If you are feeling ill, you should contact your physician. If one has responsibility for the care of a vulnerable person and legitimately has concerns of infecting that person with a virus, that one should feel obliged to stay home from Mass. If one does not feel safe in attending Mass for ongoing fear of contracting the virus or any other illness, one should stay home. If one has been exposed to COVID and is awaiting the results of testing, one should stay home from Mass. The obligation to attend Mass remains in effect by virtue of Divine Law and the Precepts of the Church and, excepting legitimate reasons like the reasons listed above, binds every Catholic under penalty of grave sin. If your health permits, you should plan on being physically present for the celebration of Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation. In making this decision, it is better to err on the side of safety for one’s own health and that of one’s neighbor especially those most prone to grave effects of infection.

Secondly, those ushers and lay ministers entrusted with the responsibility of implementing the safety protocols and all of us should avoid a spirit of complacency regarding such important protocols and practices as frequent hand washing and the use of sanitizer, the maintaining of at least three feet of physical distancing between individuals or households especially during this contagious season.

Our protocols for safety and good health have proven to be successful in preventing the spread of COVID-19 within our community. This was true even before the development and distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine. The COVID-19 vaccine is now available to everyone 5 years and older, and boosters are also available 5 months after the primary series of the COVID-19 vaccine has been administered. I strongly encourage you to consult with your physician about getting vaccinated.

Thirdly, while we strongly encourage the wearing of masks, especially for those who are unvaccinated or without natural immunity, we leave that decision to the discretion of our parishioners. I repeat my plea to you to be mindful and respectful of the potential that the decisions they make regarding the wearing of masks may impact other people. Concern for other people should inform the decision that parishioners make regarding the wearing of masks. Both ordinary and extraordinary ministers of Communion must wear masks when distributing the Eucharist because of the close physical proximity between people in the performance of this ministry.

The protocols included with this letter address the celebration of Mass and other liturgies and other social and ministerial gatherings in our parishes and institutions. They repeat and reaffirm the protocols for Mass promulgated by the Office of the Vicar General in the memo of April 26, 2021, and the Guidelines for Parish Gatherings Outside of Mass as promulgated by the Office of the Vicar General in the memo of May 20, 2021. These protocols remain in effect until further notice.

While we know that viewing the celebration of Mass by means of live-streaming or television does not substitute for actual presence and participation at Mass, we also have learned that providing for live streaming of Mass is a very consoling service for those who are unable to be physically present for Mass with the community of their home parish. This is especially true during this season when we are most prone to infection by COVID or the flu. I would like to restate my request that parishes strongly consider maintaining this practice of live streaming for the sake of including shut-ins and those who are unable to be physically present.

I would like to conclude by publicly expressing my gratitude to my priests, my deacons, seminarians, parish staff, lay leadership and health consultants for their diligence in maintaining these protocols throughout these almost two years of this pandemic. Our collaboration has enabled us to live our lives safely and with Christian concern for our neighbor, especially for those who are most vulnerable. Let us continue to pray for each other as we go about the mission of evangelization entrusted to us by Christ as His Church. I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ Michael F. Olson

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

E. James Hart

Reverend Monsignor E. James Hart
Chancellor

