



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

May 21, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

I would like to thank you for the efforts that all of you have made in patience and generosity during these past several weeks of the first phase of our return to the public celebration of Mass and sacraments with the adaptation of several restrictions and protocols for the sake of the safety of all. The Eucharist makes us the Church through communion with Christ and with each other as one body, brothers and sisters, and saves us from being an aggregate of individuals with selfish interests. In our vocation as the Church, we are to care for each other, especially the vulnerable, in the integrity of soul and body as created by God.

It is with being mindful of these and other truths of the Gospel that I am very happy to announce to you that this weekend, **May 23-24, 2020**, we will begin the second phase of public celebration of masses in the Diocese of Fort Worth. I list the following protocols for the sake of fundamental guidance and good order for this second phase of the return to public Mass in the Diocese of Fort Worth.

1. The faithful are dispensed from the obligation to attend and to participate in Sunday Mass.

There are still legitimate threats to our health from the highly contagious COVID-19 virus; these threats are especially critical for the elderly and for people with a compromised immune system because of other pre-existing conditions. 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 provides a Mass exclusively for people over the age of 60, I recommend that you attend that Mass. I am asking that people over 60 years of age not distribute Holy Communion.

2. People in attendance at Mass wear masks or scarfs over their mouths and nose inside the church to help prevent the spread of the virus.

THE CATHOLIC CENTER

The wearing of masks and face-coverings has helped greatly in preventing the spread of the coronavirus among the members of our community. The COVID-19 virus is passed along by tiny droplets of moisture that are released through our respiration. A mask covering our mouth and nose greatly inhibits and minimizes the passing of these droplets. We must think first of the good of our neighbor. 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. The current state of the pandemic dispenses you from the obligation to attend Mass.

3. **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 by the Governor of moving in Phase II from 25% to 50% capacity and CDC recommendations of social distancing with the required protocols of masks and sanitizing of hands.** The intention of social distancing when initiated in the height of the flu season and at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic was to prevent the spread so as to flatten the curve and to prevent our hospitals from being overwhelmed by patients along with a shortage of P.P.E. The situation has changed sufficiently for us to maintain social distancing while wearing masks and with people now being seated with a distance of **THREE FEET** between persons, which generally equates to the increase from 25% to 50% capacity as recommended by the Governor for Phase II of re-opening Texas. 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 with live-streaming, or will be able to follow along in their cars by live-streaming. At the end of Mass, people will be dismissed from their pews in an orderly fashion mindful of social distancing. Please do not linger and gather in groups. The procedure for distributing Holy Communion at an outside designated area is to be discontinued.
4. **I am asking that the venerable custom of receiving Holy Communion on the tongue not be done during this phase and period of pandemic.** My reasoning again for this is that the current expert opinion regarding the transmission of COVID-19 is that the virus is passed through small droplets in a person's breath received in close contact between people such as that of the hand of a minister of the Eucharist and a communicant's mouth. I realize that this is very difficult for many of us to consider because of our authentic piety in maintaining this venerable custom. It is very difficult for me to ask this of you as your bishop. Yet, I believe that it is necessary. I am asking you to be considerate in charity of your neighbor and receive Holy Communion in the hand for the time being.

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 during Phase II. All other parish gatherings are still prohibited or limited to online communications for this phase of re-opening

Texas. 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. If possible, please do not forget to maintain your stewardship and to support your parish financially.

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.

These protocols will be reassessed in two weeks as we continue to progress through each phase of re-opening Texas.

The past ten weeks have been very difficult for many people throughout the twenty-eight counties of the Diocese of Fort Worth, the State of Texas, the United States of America, and throughout the world. For us as Christians and members of Christ's Catholic Church, these have also been times for the opportunity to come to a renewal of our faith through prayer and works of mercy. Thus, we are not returning to the way things were before this pandemic, instead we are moving forward ever closer to Christ and towards establishing the Kingdom of God in our community. I thank each and all of you for the sacrifices that you have made in contributing to the fulfillment of this holy endeavor. With every good wish and my pledge of prayers for you and for your families 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 and Moderator of the Curia

