



Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls
Office of the Bishop

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August 10, 2020

Dear Faithful of the East River South Dakota (i.e. Diocese of Sioux Falls),

Thankfully, the anticipated magnitude of the serious effects of COVID-19 have not been as extensive in South Dakota as was initially projected. These past months have caused hardship not only for those who have had serious effects from the virus and their families, but also for those who have been in isolation and health care workers. Also, I am mindful of those who attend to those who are vulnerable in their families. To varying degrees, I sense we have all been affected physically, psychologically and spiritually by the various measures implemented to limit the spread of the virus.

Throughout this experience, I have kept close to mind the risk to those most vulnerable to harm and also my duty to provide for the care and nourishment of all souls, including those who can reasonably attend Mass. Therefore, it was a great joy for me to permit the resumption of public Masses beginning on May 15, though then leaving the Sunday Mass dispensation in place.

Updated Data

As your spiritual shepherd, I have been prayerfully pondering updated guidelines to help Catholics receive (greater access to) the spiritual, educational, liturgical and pastoral care that the Church uniquely offers in East River South Dakota. State Health Department data distinguishing the severity of the virus from total cases of COVID-19 infections has been most helpful in my discernment. The department's data has indicated that the most severe effects have been experienced by a very low percentage of those with infections. After receiving clarity through prayer, in light of this data, I have come to realize it is now time to change the general dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. Making this change at this time will provide greater access to the sacraments and other spiritual, educational, pastoral and liturgical celebrations in our Catholic churches and schools which is essential for us to lead the happy, healthy and holy lives God desires for us.

As I have been praying these last months, I have been monitoring COVID-19 infection rates and am grateful the projected severe harm to a large number of people in East River South Dakota has not occurred. The local data presently available is helpful. For example, as of August 10, of the 44 counties in our diocese, seven have no active cases, 22 have one to 10 active cases, and 15 have 11 or more active cases. Thanks be to God, the hospitals within our state have not suffered an overwhelming surge as was initially feared.

Taking a closer look at severity, as of August 10, statewide, 63 people are hospitalized with a COVID-19 diagnosis out of a total of 1,146 known active cases. These 63 people account for 3% of the total hospital bed capacity, 3% of intensive care unit bed capacity, and 5% of ventilator capacity for the state.

Looking back over these last months, the data shows us that the effects directly caused by COVID-19 are real. Collectively, this data indicates that infection rates have not been as widespread and the number experiencing severe illness has not been as significant in our diocese as it had been projected when the general dispensation was granted.

Why the Sunday Mass Obligation?

Our faith teaches us so beautifully through the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “(t)he celebration of Sunday observes the moral commandment inscribed by nature in the human heart to render to God an outward, visible, public, and regular worship ‘as a sign of his universal beneficence to all.’ Sunday worship fulfills the moral command of the Old Covenant, taking up its rhythm and spirit in the weekly celebration of the Creator and Redeemer of his people (p. 2176).” “(T)he Eucharist is celebrated amid the assembly of the faithful, the visible expression of the Church.” (p. 1329)

“The Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church’s life.” (p. 2179) What material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life. Communion with the flesh of the risen Christ, a flesh “given life and giving life through the Holy Spirit,” preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism. This growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion, the bread for our pilgrimage until the moment of death. (p. 1392)

Dispensation from the Obligation to Attend Sunday Mass Change

After receiving clarity through prayer, consultation with clergy and others, and in light of this data, effective on August 17, 2020, I am changing the dispensation to apply *only to those at increased risk for severe illness¹ and those responsible for their care*. It is important for all in the diocese to know that this modification is made out of pastoral concern for the souls entrusted to my spiritual care.

Guidance for Those Not at Increased Risk of Severe Illness

For those not at increased risk of severe illness, the Church has long recognized circumstances in which the faithful may be excused from Mass attendance even without a dispensation from the bishop. For example, during a normal influenza season, one who is ill with influenza-like symptoms may, in good conscience, refrain from attending Mass due to their illness, and also as an act of justice towards others so the illness isn’t passed on.

If one wishes to avoid attending Sunday Mass in person due to significant fear or some other serious reason, the Church teaches us that we must carefully discern whether the fear is morally justifiable, or whether such fear is inordinate (not reasonable) and, therefore, not based on a prudent examination of reality. But it is essential that these serious questions are discerned in prayer and that the decisions are made in good faith, based upon objective data.

To apply these principles to COVID-19, examples of circumstances that might be discerned as morally justifiable reasons for *not* attending Sunday Mass may include regular contact with a person with increased risk; recent, prolonged contact² with a symptomatic person; or a significant emotional response from fear of contracting COVID-19.

Physical Distancing and Hygiene Practices: Our Personal Responsibilities to One Another

While it is evident that South Dakotans have “flattened the curve” as was intended by our actions undertaken since the coronavirus arrived, COVID-19 remains among us. With so much yet to be known about the virus, its behavior and effects, and possible treatments or vaccinations, it may remain with us for some time. During this time, our personal efforts to maintain reasonable physical distancing measures and good hygienic practices are both prudent and important to respect all human life. Prudence also needs to take into account a variety of local circumstances, including the prevalence of coronavirus cases in each area. The accompanying guidelines I am providing are offered in an effort to help pastors, working with their staff and volunteers, discern reasonable and prudent accommodations to serve the faithful in their spiritual, educational, liturgical and pastoral care.

The letter and its accompanying guidelines are the fruit of clarity in prayer, broad consultation, and a comprehensive review of data. As shepherd and spiritual father, my desire is that all souls are happy, healthy and holy in mind, body and spirit. I will continue to pray, review the data, monitor the status of COVID-19, especially in eastern South Dakota, and make adjustments if warranted in the weeks and months ahead.

Please know of my prayers for you and your families. I invite you to join me in praying for the intercession of Mary, Our Mother, and St. Joseph, our patron, for guidance and help in the months ahead.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Donald E. DeGrood". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Donald E. DeGrood
Bishop of Sioux Falls

¹ — *There is a continuum of increasing risk, especially concerning age, and the scientific data is continually developing concerning the increased risk posed by various underlying medical conditions. For the purposes of the canonical dispensation herein, “those at increased risk for severe illness” is exclusive to those aged 65 and older and those with the following medical conditions: cancer; chronic kidney disease; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; immunocompromised state (weakened immune system) from solid organ transplant; obesity (body mass index of 30 or higher); serious heart conditions, such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, or cardiomyopathies; sickle cell disease; and type 2 diabetes mellitus.*

² — *Department of Health Guidelines define prolonged contact as having been within 6 feet of another individual for 15 minutes or longer.*



August 10, 2020

Updated Guidelines for Liturgies and other Ministry Activity in Parishes

Our faith informs us that attendance at Sunday Mass is *essential* for the wellbeing of the faithful whenever reasonably possible. Therefore, effective on August 17, 2020, the general dispensation to attend Sunday Mass will be lifted and the Sunday obligation restored for all the faithful *except those at increased risk of serious illness¹ and those responsible for their care*. Pastors and Catholic leaders should anticipate and plan for more faithful at Mass and other ministries and events.

To that end, the following guidance is intended to aid in discerning appropriate measures to implement. This guidance replaces what was provided on May 1, 2020. It is the fruit of clarity in prayer, broad consultation, and a comprehensive review of data.

Celebration of Mass and Other Liturgies

1. Persons with symptoms of an illness are asked to stay home.
2. Promote prudent and reasonable social (physical) distancing and good hygiene practices.
 - a. This can be done, for example, with signs at entrances stating: Please be prudent about practicing social distancing and healthy hygiene.
 - b. In those worship spaces where pews have been marked off in 6 ft. distancing, pastors may gradually remove the physical barriers (e.g. ropes, etc.) to allow for more seating.
 1. The removal of physical barriers might be done only in certain areas of the church's seating. By designating a certain portion of the worship space, we are respecting that some parishioners may prefer physical barriers to aid them in maintaining reasonable social distances.
 2. Parishes may introduce these changes incrementally, over a series of weekends so as to encourage Mass attendees to self-initiate prudent and reasonable social distancing practices.
 - c. Provide sanitizer and disposable masks at entrances allowing faithful to sanitize and wear masks if they so choose.
 - d. In some parishes, it may be appropriate to designate a particular Sunday Mass for those who are more vulnerable or who provide regular care to those at elevated risk. This might allow some to feel safer while attending.
3. All faithful are free to access the sacraments, liturgies and other ministries of our parishes. Preregistration should no longer be requested of Mass attendees so the faithful can attend when it best serves them.
4. Pastors may consider offering additional Mass times but should not exceed a reasonably healthy number of Masses for each priest (c. 905).

5. Pastors are asked to normalize the parish's use of liturgical ministers wherever reasonably possible, including the Mass procession.
6. It is prudent that the sign of peace would continue to be suspended and that the passing of collection baskets should be avoided. Similarly, at this time, gift bearers should not be used during the offertory at Masses.
7. Disposable worship aids, rather than missalettes or hymnals, should be considered.
8. Holy Water may be restored to Holy Water receptacles in church and other typical locations in Catholic facilities for those who choose to use it.

Consecration and Distribution of Holy Communion

1. Placement of ciboria for consecration of hosts for the faithful should be on a separate corporal to the side of the celebrant's paten and chalice. Deacons and concelebrants should receive from separate ciborium and only concelebrating priests intinct.
2. Priests, Deacons and any Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC) are expected to use hand sanitizer prior to distribution of Holy Communion.
3. Make provisions for some EMHC's to wear masks when distributing to serve parishioners preferring to receive from someone with a mask. Priests and Deacons should not wear masks when distributing within the Mass. A purificator and sanitizer should be available at each location Holy Communion is distributed in case there is physical contact with the hand or tongue of the communicant so proper sanitation can occur before communion is distributed to others. Priests concerned about their personal health may delegate the distribution of Holy Communion to an EMHC.
4. Distribution of Holy Communion should be provided on the tongue or hand based on the desire of the faithful during mass. If some parishioners prefer to receive after Mass, reasonable accommodations should be provided on an as-needed basis. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should use an ablution bowl for their fingers and then hand sanitizer after distribution of Holy Communion.
5. Distribution of the Precious Blood is not advised except in case of gluten intolerance, for which arrangements may be made with the priest prior to Mass.
6. Priests should purify their own paten and chalice.

Parish Ministry and Formation Considerations

1. Due to the important nature of various parish ministries for people of all ages, parishes should plan to resume offering spiritual, educational and pastoral formation. Programming and formation opportunities, including a plan for how programming delivery may be modified in the event of a positive COVID-19 test result being reported by a participant. If a positive COVID-19 is identified, seek professional and diocesan counsel on how best to respond.
2. Persons with symptoms consistent with those commonly seen among COVID-19 patients are asked to stay home from all formation and/or social activities.
3. When offering these ministries, parishes and schools should:
 - a. Promote prudent and reasonable social (physical) distancing. Mask wearing may be appropriate when persons are in close contact with others for prolonged periods of time. SD Department of Health guidance defines prolonged as “within 6’ of one another for over 15 minutes.”
 - b. Promote good hygiene, such as frequent handwashing/sanitizing, routine cleaning of spaces, and more frequent disinfection of frequently-touched objects may be encouraged.
 - c. Provide sanitizer and disposable masks at entrances, enabling people to sanitize their hands and wear masks if they so choose.
4. Small groups and family-centered catechesis and formation may prove especially fruitful and may be considered.
5. Some individuals and families may be exploring creative or alternative educational models, such as homeschooling or remote education. Creativity and flexibility in programming and timelines for completion should be adapted to serve the faithful well. Parishes and schools are encouraged to prioritize ongoing outreach by regularly providing formation resources for participants.

Use of Parish and School Facilities and Public Gatherings

1. Parish facilities may be used for gatherings either for parish ministry activities or, if a local practice, for personal use in accord with the facility’s use policy or with the consent of the pastor.
2. Persons with symptoms of an illness are asked to stay home. Promote prudent and reasonable social (physical) distancing and good hygiene practices.
3. Provide sanitizer and disposable masks at entrances enabling people to sanitize their hands and wear masks if they so choose.
4. Good hygiene, such as frequent handwashing/sanitizing, wearing a mask when in close contact with others for prolonged periods, routine cleaning of spaces, and more frequent disinfection of frequently-touched objects may be encouraged.
5. Physical layout, e.g., the arrangement of tables and chairs, may be modified to promote social distancing and hygiene or sanitation supplies should be available whenever possible.

Remaining Attentive to Public Health Information

The South Dakota Department of Health regularly updates demographic data about COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations daily. Pastors, principals and Catholic leaders should consult this data frequently to make certain local increases in the risks for severe illness are not taking place as they might merit adjustments to the measures contained in these guidelines.

The department's updated data can be accessed at:

<https://doh.sd.gov/news/coronavirus.aspx>

Those at Increased Risk for Serious Illness

There is a continuum of increasing risk, especially concerning age, and the scientific data is continually developing concerning the increased risk posed by various underlying medical conditions.

For the purposes of the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass, those at increased risk for severe illness is exclusive to those aged 65 or older and the following medical conditions, as identified by the Center for Disease Control, may also constitute severe risk: cancer; chronic kidney disease; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; in an immunocompromised state (e.g. from solid organ transplant); obesity (body mass index of 30 or higher); serious heart conditions, such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, or cardiomyopathies; sickle cell disease; and type 2 diabetes mellitus.

Prolonged Contact

Department of Health Guidelines define prolonged contact as having been within 6 feet of another individual for 15 minutes or longer.