

Diocese of Joliet

Coronavirus Update

June 24, 2020

To: Diocese of Joliet Priests, Deacons, Religious Communities, Diocesan and Parish Staff
From: Bishop Richard E. Pates

Dear Priests, Deacons, Religious Community Members, Diocesan and Parish Staff:

Thank you for your diligence as we continue to recover from the coronavirus quarantine and re-open our parishes. I am ever so grateful for the work of our parish priests, staff and volunteers, and for the patience of our parishioners.

I. ILLINOIS MOVES TO PHASE 4 OF “RESTORE ILLINOIS”

All regions in the State of Illinois expect to enter Phase 4 of the “Restore Illinois” plan put forth by the governor on Friday, June 26, 2020. Notably, Phase 4 permits “all outdoor recreation” and “all gatherings of 50 people or fewer”. IDPH-recommended practices such as the use of masks, social distancing, personal hygiene, surface sanitization and self-isolation when feeling ill, remain in force.

As you know, religious services resumed in the Diocese of Joliet on June 6 with capacity limits based on plans proposed by the parishes and approved by our Reopening Team. Those plans will remain in force during Phase 4 of the “Restore Illinois” plan. Those plans are not based on a generalized “gathering size”, but rather on the ability of attendees to maintain 6’ social distancing in our various worship spaces.

In an earlier letter, I recommended that parish offices open coincident with resuming public Mass. We have received several questions regarding the permitting of meetings and other gatherings that are not religious services. The state’s guidance in this area is sufficient. Group sizes should be limited to 10 until Phase 4 begins, at which point groups of 50 may meet. It seems there is no limitation on the size of outdoor gatherings, however, **under all circumstances strict social distancing and the use of masks and other IDPH recommendations should be strictly enforced.**

The adherence to strict social distancing necessarily means that group sizes will be severely limited by the size of the meeting space. While we do NOT anticipate “certifying” parish halls or other meeting spaces as we did for religious services, our re-opening team is available to consult with your staff in determining capacity limitations and suggested practices.

2. POSITIVE TESTS AND CONTACT TRACING

A number of parishes have asked regarding the inevitable instance of a priest, volunteer or Mass attendee testing positive for COVID-19. While no individual is required to disclose their medical diagnosis, we strongly encourage, and ask parishes to encourage, self-reporting to the pastor with all possible assurance of anonymity and privacy.

In the event of a positive test, the following information should be obtained, if possible:

- a. Dates of the positive test, most recent negative test (if applicable), and onset of symptoms (if not asymptomatic);
- b. List of liturgies or parish events attended by the individual within 14 days of the positive test or onset of symptoms;
- c. Whether or not the individual received Holy Communion, or if they participated substantially in the service (e.g. as a greeter, minister, or participant in a Sacrament);
- d. Whether the individual or members of their household attended other events at the parish or any other parishes during the same 14-day time frame;
- e. Confirmation that all safety precautions were followed that the events in question; and
- f. Contact information for the individual.

Once this information is obtained, please pull the attendance and volunteer records for the events referenced by the individual. Then please proceed to contact CHRIS NYE at the pastoral center. Share as many details as possible but **DO NOT** include the names or other identifying information of the infected person(s). Our offices will assist you in preparing a communication to potentially exposed persons.

Parishioners should feel welcomed and comfortable in disclosing a positive diagnosis. Their willingness to come forward, and your diligent adherence to these procedures, could be critical to avoiding the spread of infection and early detection of the disease which could be life-saving.

3. COMMON CONCERNS FOR PRIESTS AND MINISTERS

Our offices continue to receive many questions and concerns regarding our services. I'm thankful to our priests, deacons and all those assisting in performing the Sacraments. The following notes are intended to address some common questions raised to my attention:

- a. The priest may remove his mask to pray aloud *when alone and at the altar*.
- b. Masks absolutely must be on when within six feet of another person.
- c. We still do not recommend the use of cantors. If a cantor is used, they must maintain a twelve foot distance from anyone, and must replace their mask immediately at the conclusion of each song. The congregation should not sing at all.

- d. Mask and face shield are to be worn by all ministers administering a Sacrament. This includes the priest, deacons and Eucharistic ministers. The face shield is for the protection of the minister who will encounter many individuals.
- e. Procession through the Church should be avoided where possible.

Finally, we are also deeply involved presently with re-opening our schools and religious education programs for the Fall. It requires a great deal of effort. Where applicable we genuinely appreciate your cooperation and support.

I remain thankful for everyone's continued attention to these extraordinary efforts to keep our people safe during this time of pandemic. Some of you have noted that during live-streamed events, I or others have at times failed to strictly adhere to these guidelines. I will try to do better and ask that despite these momentary lapses that we continue to strive to follow these guidelines for the safety of all.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

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Most Reverend Richard E. Pates
Apostolic Administrator
Diocese of Joliet