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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Protocols to Prepare for a Return to Public Masses
in the Diocese of Crookston during COVID-19 Crisis**

CROOKSTON, MINNESOTA, May 15, 2020 – Recognizing the spiritual impact the COVID-19 crisis is having on the people of Minnesota and the resulting psychological consequences, the Bishops of Minnesota have developed protocols to be taken for limited religious services in church buildings. These protocols are meant to ensure social distancing and minimize the risk for the spread of the virus. Just as other activities are being allowed for the health of the people, Minnesota Bishops believe it is possible to provide public Masses in a safe way. The six Catholic dioceses in Minnesota seek to be uniform concerning both when public Masses will begin again and how the numbers attending Mass are approached.

The following is based on current guidance issued by the World Health Organization (WHO), the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other public health authorities and has been developed in consultation with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Religious services in buildings

Some essential religious services for small groups inside church buildings should be possible. These essential worship services include the Mass (Sunday/daily) and other sacramental celebrations (e.g. baptisms, weddings, and funerals), and other important prayers or devotions (e.g., Eucharistic adoration). This does not include social gatherings, small group studies, or other support meetings. Those over age 65 are strongly encouraged not to attend. In addition, anyone showing any symptoms of sickness, or anyone who has a household member who is sick or showing symptoms of sickness should not attend; this includes priests or other ministers who are sick or showing signs of sickness. Priests who are part of a vulnerable population should keep social distance very strictly by not processing in and out of the sanctuary through the center/main aisle and not distributing Holy Communion.

Groups should not exceed 1/3 of the seating capacity of the church. More services should be offered if necessary and people are encouraged to come on other days of the week instead of Sunday, in order to spread them out. People should be reminded that the bishops of the state have removed the religious obligation to attend Mass on Sunday, so no one feels obliged to

come if they do not feel safe. To ensure the number of people who come to Church does not exceed the agreed upon limit, online sign up and other ways to spread out attendance should be used.

The following precautions should be taken:

- Two out of every three pews should be marked off so people cannot sit too close (unless they are members of the same household living together).
- The space should be thoroughly sanitized before and after each service, including all entryways and doors. CDC guidelines for cleaning: <https://bit.ly/2yHXpq2>
- Doors should be propped open and one-way traffic patterns should be introduced to ensure social distancing. Ushers should assist when necessary to help maintain social distancing.
- Signs should be posted concerning social distancing and sanitation requirements, and reminders should be offered.
- Hand sanitizers should be available at all entryways.
- Collection plates and other items should not be passed person to person.
- People should be encouraged to bring their own protective wear including facemasks, and gloves if they desire. CDC guidelines for face covering: <https://bit.ly/2zsXSMG>
- People should be instructed not to greet each other with touching.
- Large choirs singing close together should not occur. Small scholas or a single cantor are allowed if they are appropriately distanced.
- Signs and other instructions should encourage normal, safe practices necessary to slow and/or stop the spread (e.g. cough or sneeze into a shirtsleeve, handkerchief, or tissue; avoid touching the eyes, nose, and mouth).
- Holy water fonts should be empty, and hymnals should be removed from pews.
- Ventilation should be increased as much as possible, opening windows and doors, as weather permits.
- Special attention should be given to children to make sure social distancing is practiced. Parents should be encouraged to speak to their children before coming to Mass to let them know things will be different. (Cloth face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2 – see *CDC recommendations for face coverings above*).
- Each facility should develop a plan for restroom use to limit the number of people who enter a restroom at the same time, and place tape on the floor outside the restroom to indicate where people should stand in line to wait for the restroom, maintaining 6-foot distance from each other.
- If Church leadership becomes aware of a clear, immediate, and imminent threat to the safety of the attendees or determines the abovementioned protocols cannot be observed, the gathering will be cancelled until the protocols can be observed.
- The priest and other liturgical ministers should not wear masks or gloves during the celebration of the Mass. Instead, they should remain more than 6 feet from the

congregation during the entirety of the Mass to minimize the risk of infection. To the extent possible, the other ministers (deacon, servers, lectors) should maintain 6-foot distance from the priest and from each other.

These guidelines are intended to create basic standards applicable to all settings. Due to the diversity of church architecture and the unique needs that may arise in a particular setting, there may be slight variances in application; similarly, additional measures may be required. Parishes are urged to consult with the Office of Worship. Civic officials are invited to hold parishes accountable to these measures through periodic checks. Violations of these measures could cause public celebrations to be cancelled.

Distribution of Holy Communion

Distribution of Holy Communion is an important part of the Catholic Mass and requires special care. The directives given here reflect both the Church's great reverence for the Eucharist and the powerful sacramental and liturgical symbolism of Holy Communion, while also providing appropriate precautions against infection.¹

Prior to the distribution of Holy Communion, the priest should explain how those who desire to receive Holy Communion will be able to do so, explaining especially that they must maintain 6-foot distance as they come forward. Tape should be placed on the floor to indicate proper spacing between people for the procession to communion. No one is required to come forward who does not feel comfortable doing so.

- Holy Communion should be given to the people only by the consecrated host; there will be no sharing of the communion cup.
- A sufficient quantity of hosts for the faithful should be consecrated at the Mass but placed on a corporal on the side of the altar to allow the priest to consecrate the main host without fear of breathing on the hosts for the faithful.
- A small table will be placed at each communion station with an unfolded corporal and a bottle of hand sanitizer.
- The number of communion stations and ministers of communion should be limited so the 6-foot distance can be maintained at all times.

¹ Here we are taking into account the FDA Food Safety recommendations, it is important to note their statement: "Unlike foodborne gastrointestinal (GI) viruses like norovirus and hepatitis A that often make people ill through contaminated food, SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19, is a virus that causes respiratory illness. Foodborne exposure to this virus is not known to be a route of transmission" (<https://www.fda.gov/food/food-safety-during-emergencies/food-safety-and-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>). The CDC adds: "Currently, there is no evidence to support transmission of COVID-19 associated with food... It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object, like a packaging container, that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes, but this is not thought to be the main way the virus spreads" (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#How-COVID-19-Spreads>).

- The priest should wear a mask and sanitize his hands before distributing communion. Gloves are not necessary since hand hygiene is effective against the virus.
- The priest or the deacon takes his place next to the communion station.
- The faithful remove their face coverings as they approach the priest.
- The faithful receive Holy Communion in the normal way.² If the priest senses his fingers have made contact with a person's hands or mouth, he is to pause, place the ciborium on the corporal, and use hand sanitizer. He may repeat this as often as he judges necessary during the distribution of Holy Communion. It is not necessary for him to use hand sanitizer between each communicant, unless he actually makes contact.

Outdoor services

The current practice of offering outdoor services, with people remaining in their cars, may continue. Outdoor religious services are allowed, even with people outside their vehicles provided the 6-foot social distancing requirement is met, except for members of the same household. Distribution of Holy Communion should happen as listed above. If these outdoor gatherings are so large that it becomes difficult to distribute Holy Communion safely, Holy Communion will not be offered.

Concerning Religious Communities

It is expected that guests visiting religious communities would socially distance in worship services, including the priest if he comes in to give the sacraments. Care should be taken that he does not give the virus to anyone. The priest in giving the sacraments should follow the same precautions stated above. If someone comes down with symptoms of the virus that person should be isolated apart from the community and not be allowed to come to community worship services.

COVID-19 Testing for Clergy

It is desired that the State help with easily accessible testing for clergy administering essential services to congregants at a similar level to other front-line workers. This would allow them to continue to minister or to isolate when necessary and increase safety. This goal is currently being pursued.

² Experts at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, D.C., in consultation with medical experts have carefully considered the question of communion on the tongue vs. communion in the hand. Given the Church's existing guidance on this point (see *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 92), and recognizing the differing judgments and sensibilities that are involved, they believe that, with the precautions listed here, it is possible to distribute on the tongue without additional risk. The mouth and the hand pose the same risk of infection if they are touched.