



Office of the Bishop

Diocese of El Paso

Catholic Pastoral Center

MEMORANDUM

To: All Priests, Deacons and Administrators of the Diocese of El Paso

From: Bishop Mark Seitz

Re: Resumption of Church Gatherings During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Date: May 7, 2020

Based upon the swiftly rising numbers of hospitalizations in El Paso County the decision has been made to keep our church buildings closed and limit gatherings for the time being in El Paso and its surrounding towns. However, the situation is quite different in our rural Counties with generally no or very few cases. In these rural Counties a gradual and limited opening of churches and an increase in those permitted to gather will be permitted based upon the judgement of the local pastor or administrator. You will find details below in this document.

As some churches in the diocese prepare to, in a measured way, resume church gatherings, here are some points for all clergy of the diocese to keep in mind to ensure the health and safety of our parishioners, volunteers, staff and clergy. Pastors are asked to become familiar with these norms and the reasons behind them, and to educate their staff members, volunteers, and faithful.

The overarching concern is that we do whatever we can to minimize opportunities for the virus to spread among our people in our churches. That is why, **if a church cannot be sanitized according to the Cleaning and Disinfection norms below, church gatherings may not resume there. Similarly, if a liturgical celebration or event cannot maintain the Social Distancing norms below, it may not take place.** These norms grant permission to pastors to resume church gatherings, but prudential decisions will need to be made locally in each parish whether they can be implemented.

Put simply, many eyes will be on the diocese, her priests, and her people, observing our leadership and judging our actions. Some may even be motivated by malice or a desire to embarrass the Church. However, our prudent actions — motivated principally by the Lord's



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command to “love your neighbor” — will demonstrate our care and concern for the health and well-being of our people and the community at large. The virus that causes Covid-19 is still circulating in our communities. We should continue to observe practices that protect everyone, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Phased Plan to Resume Church Gatherings

- Churches in the Diocese of El Paso will resume gatherings **in a phased manner**. All phases have in common the strict following of the Disinfection and Social Distancing norms below. The phases only differ in the size and frequency of the gatherings.
- Based on the number of Covid-19 cases in each part of the diocese, and the guidance from Governor Abbot regarding rural counties where there are few or no cases of the virus, churches in **El Paso County** and those in **West Texas** (Brewster, Culberson, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, Loving, Presidio, Reeves, Ward and Winkler Counties) will follow different phases at different times as they gradually resume church gatherings:
 - **Suspended Status:** This is the current *status quo* throughout the diocese: Church gatherings are limited to just those necessary to facilitate the celebration or live-streaming of Mass, not to exceed 10 people. Funerals, weddings, baptisms, and similar liturgies are postponed. Churches are closed for prayer during the day. Confession is available by appointment only.
 - **Phase 1:** Church gatherings remain limited to less than 10 people. But churches where Disinfection and Social Distancing norms are strictly followed may be open for a time during the day for personal prayer by individuals. Scheduled times for Confession may also be offered, provided the Social Distancing norms below are strictly followed.
 - **Phase 2:** Churches where Disinfection and Social Distancing norms are strictly followed may resume gatherings at 25% capacity for Mass on weekdays, baptisms, weddings, funerals, Eucharistic exposition for 1–2 hours, and prayer during the day. Sunday Masses remain suspended, however, in this phase. This period will allow parishes to practice the Disinfection and Social Distancing norms, making them routine before the resumption of gatherings on Sundays.



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- **Phase 3:** Churches where Disinfection and Social Distancing norms are strictly followed may also resume gatherings for Sunday Mass at 25% capacity.
- **Phase 4:** Churches where Disinfection and Social Distancing norms are strictly followed may expand gatherings to 50% capacity.
- **Phase 5:** Disinfection and Social Distancing norms are relaxed, but not eliminated, and churches may expand gatherings to 100% capacity.
- In accord with Governor Abbot's guidance for rural counties where there are few or no cases of the virus, churches in **West Texas** may resume church gatherings on **Saturday, May 9, 2020, at Phase 4** listed above, to the extent that the pastor deems prudent. Trends in the virus' spread in the El Paso area dictate that churches in **El Paso County** remain at the **Suspended Status** for the time being.
- Be aware that spikes in the spread of the virus may cause the diocese to re-evaluate the phase in effect. Though certainly undesirable, it may be necessary to revert to the practices of earlier phases, if health conditions warrant.

Who Should Continue to Stay Home

- Though church gatherings are resuming, some individuals **should not attend Mass or other church gatherings** at this time. This includes those who are sick and those in the at-risk population: persons who are 65 or older, especially those with chronic lung disease; moderate to severe asthma; chronic heart disease; severe obesity; diabetes; high blood pressure; chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis; liver disease; or weakened immune system.
- **Clergy and other ministers who are sick** or exhibiting symptoms should neither preside at nor attend Mass or other church gatherings.
- Because church capacities will be so limited, the faithful are highly encouraged to **attend Mass on a weekday if they are able**, so that greater capacity may be available at



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Sunday Masses for those who cannot attend during the week. Masses during the week should continue to observe the liturgical calendar, however.

- For these reasons, **televised and live-streamed Masses** with Bishop Mark will continue, and they should continue at the parish level as well.
- All Catholics of the Diocese of El Paso **remain dispensed from the obligation to attend Mass** on Sundays and other holy days of Obligation (canon 1247). However, the faithful unable to gather for Mass are encouraged to participate with televised and live-streamed Masses every Sunday from home and to incorporate a routine of prayer at other times during the week. The requirement to receive Communion during the Easter Season (canon 920) may be fulfilled at another time during the year.
- Churches may need to implement ways for parishioners to **make a reservation to attend Mass**, assigning seats at Mass, or assigning certain Masses to certain groups of parishioners (those with last names beginning with A through G, for example). Churches should ensure that these methods are available to persons who do not have access to the Internet.

Social Distancing Norms for Churches

- Throughout each phase of the plan to resume church gatherings, churches will ensure that the faithful **keep at least 6 feet of separation** between parties at all times everywhere on church property. When seated, 6 feet of separation must be maintained between parties, except when two or more members of the same household sit adjacent to one another, with 6 feet of separation on either side.
- These Social Distancing norms apply to all areas of the church and its property. If Mass or another prayer service occurs **outdoors or is simulcast in a second space**, for example, the following Social Distancing norms still apply.
- It is recommended that there be **only one entrance** used to enter the church. However, multiple exits should continue to be used.



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- **Every other pew in the church should be blocked off** with rope or tape (not “Caution” tape) and remain empty. Hospitality ministers should guide families to seats so that social distancing is maintained. Clear signs should indicate which seats are available and which are closed.
- Lines 6 feet apart should be **marked in the aisles** to facilitate social distancing during the Communion Procession. The Communion Procession itself should be limited to one line only.
- **Smaller spaces** in which it would be difficult to maintain social distancing, such as cry rooms, should be closed.
- **Once the church reaches 25% or 50% capacity** (depending on the phase), it may be necessary for hospitality ministers to close the doors of the church and turn people away. This must be done with the greatest sense of hospitality and sensitivity. Hospitality ministers should guide people unable to enter the church to Masses at other times, on other days, on television, or online.
- After Mass concludes, families and groups from the same household should be **dismissed by hospitality ministers** in an orderly fashion to avoid crowding at the exits.
- All in the church age 2 or above — parishioners, ministers, volunteers, and clergy — **must wear masks or fabric face coverings and avoid physical contact**. Pastors should endeavor to provide masks or fabric face coverings to those who arrive without one.
- During Mass, **clergy should not wear a mask or face covering except when distributing Communion**. Lectors should remove their mask or face covering when proclaiming the Word at the ambo. Cantors and other music ministers may remove masks or face coverings while singing, so long as social distancing is strictly observed.

Cleaning and Disinfecting Norms for Churches

- In order for a church to resume gatherings, personnel and supplies must be available to properly **disinfect** all surfaces that the people have touched **after every Mass or service**. This includes door handles, railings, pews, *prie-dieus*, sacristy areas, and bathroom



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fixtures. Hard surfaces should be wiped with antibacterial wipes. Upholstered seats should be sprayed with a disinfectant. Disposable gloves should be used while cleaning.

- Parish staff members and volunteers **must be trained** in how to properly disinfect surfaces after every Mass.
- Because they are difficult to sanitize after every Mass, **hymnals and misalettees** should be removed from pews. Hymn lyrics can be printed in disposable worship aids or projected in the church. If hymnals must be used, it is recommended that they be made available at the church entrance, and immediately sanitized when returned at the end of Mass.
- **Collection boxes or one large basket** where the faithful can deposit their offering should be used instead of collection baskets that are passed from person to person. Parishioners should continue to be encouraged to use online forms of giving.
- It is highly recommended that **hand sanitizer stations** be placed at every entrance and that the people use them when entering the church.
- Pastors may, at their discretion, **adjust the schedule of Masses** on Sundays to allow additional time for proper cleaning and disinfection in between Masses.

General Liturgical Norms During the Pandemic

- **Physical contact should be avoided**, especially when greeting people before and after Mass, and during the Sign of Peace and the Lord's Prayer.
- The **gifts of bread and wine** should not be brought forward in procession, but should simply be brought from the credence table.
- Distribution of Communion to the assembly will be limited to **the species of bread**. Separate chalices should be prepared for each deacon or concelebrating priest.
- Communion may be distributed only by a priest, deacon, or seminarian who is an instituted acolyte, all who **must wear a mask or face covering** to distribute Communion.



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They should use hand sanitizer at the credence table before and after the Communion Procession; gloves may not be used to distribute Communion. Hospitality ministers should guide the Communion Procession so that social distancing is maintained.

- Reception of Communion should be **only in the hand**.
- Petitions during the **Prayer of the Faithful** should continue to pray for those afflicted with the coronavirus, health care workers and others who care for them, and those who have died from the disease. Petitions should also be included to pray for those still unable to participate in Mass in person.
- **Holy water fonts** should remain empty. However, holy water should be available for the faithful to take home in individual containers.
- It is suggested that the first public Mass, if celebrated on a weekday not precluded by an obligatory memorial or higher-ranking feast, be the Mass for Various Needs and Occasions #49: **“For Giving Thanks to God,”** found in the *Roman Missal*.
- On weekdays not precluded by an obligatory memorial or higher-ranking feast, priests are encouraged to celebrate the **Mass in Time of Pandemic**, recently released by the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments. Copies of the Mass texts have been emailed to priests in the diocese, and are also available from the diocesan Office of Worship.

Confessions, Funerals, Baptisms, First Communions, Weddings, Quinceañeras, and Confirmations

- **When churches are in Phase 2**, confessions, funerals, baptisms, first communions, weddings, *quinceañeras*, and confirmations may be celebrated according to the norms below.



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- In churches where gatherings have resumed, **confessions** may be heard in open areas of the church under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. Due to their confined space, the use of confessionals is discouraged. The priest and the penitent should wear masks or fabric face coverings, and at least 6 feet should separate the priest and penitent at all times. Places touched by the penitent should be sanitized after each confession. Those waiting to confess should be advised to maintain social distancing.
- In churches where church gatherings have resumed, **funerals** may also be celebrated under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. The numbers of those present may not exceed 25% or 50% capacity, depending on the phase; social distancing must be observed; and though pastorally difficult, physical contact should be avoided. Social distancing must be observed before and after the funeral or at the graveside by all present.
- So that family and friends may have the opportunity to pray for individuals who died while public Masses were suspended, a **memorial Mass** should be scheduled for each deceased individual. If pastorally appropriate, this can be scheduled at a later time when church capacities are less restricted.
- **Infant baptisms** may also be celebrated under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. To maintain social distancing, celebrations of baptism should be limited to few candidates and their families; additional celebrations may need to be scheduled. Preparations should be made so that the same baptismal water is not poured over different children; additional basins may be necessary. This water should then be disposed of in the font's drain or into the ground on the church property. Priests and deacons are reminded that an instrument (cotton balls, swabs, or gloves) may not be used for the anointings of the baptismal rite. Social distancing must be observed before, during, and after the rite by all present.
- **First Communions** may also be celebrated under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. Due to reduced capacity in churches, more than one Mass may need to be designated, even on a weekday, so that the numbers of those



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present do not exceed 25% or 50% capacity, depending on the phase, and social distancing can be observed before, during, and after the rite by all present. Priests are permitted, even on feasts and obligatory memorials for pastoral advantage, to celebrate **Votive Mass #5: The Most Holy Eucharist** or the **Mass of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ** found in the *Roman Missal*.

- **Weddings** may also be celebrated under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. The bride and groom need not wear masks **during the Mass** itself, and the wedding party need not wear masks **during the Mass** either, so long as social distancing is strictly observed. The numbers of those present may not exceed 25% or 50% capacity, depending on the phase, and social distancing must be observed before, during, and after the rite by all present.
- **Quinceañeras** may also be celebrated under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. The young lady need not wear a mask **during the Mass** itself, and her court need not wear masks **during the Mass** either, so long as social distancing is strictly observed. The numbers of those present may not exceed 25% or 50% capacity, depending on the phase, and social distancing must be observed before, during, and after by all present.
- **Confirmations:** Bishop Mark is delegating to pastors the faculty to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation in parishes where scheduled Confirmations have been unable to be celebrated due to the pandemic. This faculty is extended until further notice. Confirmations may be celebrated under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. Due to reduced capacity in churches, more than one Mass may need to be designated, even on a weekday, so that the numbers of those present do not exceed 25% or 50% capacity, depending on the phase, and social distancing can be observed before, during, and after the rite by all present. Priests should celebrate **Ritual Mass #I.4: For the Conferral of Confirmation** found in the *Roman Missal* and are reminded that an instrument (cotton balls, swabs, or gloves) may not be used to anoint. The Office of Worship will soon provide parishes with materials for this celebration.



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- **Other prayer services and devotions**, such as Eucharistic adoration, may also be celebrated in the church under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above. The numbers of those present may not exceed 25% or 50% capacity, depending on the phase, and social distancing must be observed before, during, and after by all present. Pastors are reminded that the live-streaming of Eucharistic exposition is not permitted unless accompanied by prayer that those viewing from home can actively participate in. It is highly recommended that all-night or all-day Eucharistic exposition not occur at this time.
- **Processions** — of the Eucharist, of relics, of images of saints, or for Corpus Christi, for example — are not permitted in any part of the diocese at the present time.

Christian Initiation

- In parishes that have resumed public Masses, the **celebration of Christian Initiation** may be celebrated for those prevented from doing so at the Easter Vigil this year. This can be scheduled at the pastor's discretion under the same provisions regarding social distancing and disinfection listed above, but should be on a Sunday (or Saturday anticipated Mass).
- The Mass of the day may be used, or **Ritual Mass #1.3: "For the Conferral of Baptism"** found in the *Roman Missal*.
- The **readings** may be those of the day, or may be selected from the *Lectioary*, nos. 751–755, "Celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation apart from the Easter Vigil."
- In this Mass, the Easter candle is lit. The Penitential Act, the Kyrie and the Creed are omitted. The Gloria, however, is said.
- After the homily, the **rites normally celebrated at the Easter Vigil** begin (found in the *RCIA* book at no. 218ff., or at 566ff. if also incorporating the Rite of Reception):
 - The Presentation of the Candidates
 - The Litany of the Saints



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- Prayer over the Water (Option A, B, or C should be used. The celebrant does not lower the Easter candle, but simply touches the water with his right hand)
- Profession of Faith
- Baptism (Candidates should not be baptized by immersion this year. The water and basin used should be prepared so that the same water is not poured over different candidates.)
- [Clothing with a Baptismal Garment] (optional)
- Presentation of a Lighted Candle
- Celebration of Confirmation (Priests are reminded that an instrument [cotton balls, swabs, or gloves] may not be used for the anointing with Chrism).
- Mass continues with the Prayer of the Faithful. (The Renewal of Baptismal Promises is omitted outside of the Easter Vigil.)
- During the Easter Season, Preface II of Easter is used. Outside of the Easter Season, Preface I of the Sundays in Ordinary Time is used. There are also inserts for Eucharistic Prayer I, II, III, and IV, found at the Ritual Mass #3: "For the Conferral of Baptism."