



DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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M E M O R A N D U M

Date: October 1, 2021

To: Pastors, Parish Administrators, Deacons and Parish Staff

From: Bishop Warfel +BMW

Re: COVID-19 Directives Update

The last update on directives on protocols to address COVID-19 was last April. At that time there were generally improved circumstances which led me to ease restrictions for parishes related activities. The spread of Covid 19 has now increased again which has led me to review the present situation. **As previously noted, the guidance from the county-city health department needs to be observed. However, if the respective health department does not require masks or restrictions on the number of people in a building, neither are these restrictions now required at parishes in those counties.** (*Catholic Schools in the Diocese have their own policy*).

People are still becoming infected and hospitalized though this is at a much lower rate for those who have received a vaccine. The current statistics are 88.6% of those hospitalized are non-vaccinated and 83.5% of deaths from Covid 19 are those who are non-vaccinated. While there is no mandate from the diocese to receive a Covid vaccine, I strongly urge all to do so. While some may object to receiving the vaccine, there is no religious exception for it. Receiving vaccines, given that a vaccine is developed properly and not using aborted stem cell lines for their development, is not against Catholic teaching. As pastors, I ask you to urge your parishioners to receive the vaccine if they have not yet done so.

It is also good to review some basic practices with your parishioners. The wearing of face coverings is being urged in many settings now. While not required, parishioners should be informed that it is a helpful measure toward slowing the spread of the virus. Frequent handwashing and generally good hygiene practices are a simple and effective way to help stave, not only Covid but flu and cold viruses also. Of course, parishioners should be reminded that if they are showing symptoms of sickness, they should stay home as a precaution and get tested in order to determine that they do not have Covid 19.



Bishop's Livestock Brand

County-city health departments strongly recommend such practices. Many residents of Montana, like myself, have been fully vaccinated either with the Moderna or the Pfizer vaccine. Receiving the vaccine is not a silver bullet against contracting Covid 19 (I tested positive in September and had to isolate for 10 days.) What I can affirm is that having been vaccinated mitigated my symptoms. While I do understand that some people have a distrust with being vaccinated in general, the more people vaccinated will help to prevent spread.

The following are a review to existing protocols for the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings:

If a county health department does not require face coverings or restrictions on capacity, neither are these restrictions required at parishes in those counties. If county health departments do require masks and spacing, these restrictions are required at parishes also. You should check with your county-city health department weekly.

There is no dispensation to attendance at Sunday Mass or Holy Days. Parishioners should be reminded that if they are sick or concerned due to being seriously vulnerable to infection, it is a legitimate excusing reason for not attending Mass.

Parish gatherings are allowed following the guidance of local county-city health departments. It is important to be mindful of those who may be vulnerable and who have underlying conditions which may include the parish priest. Each parish church should have masks available at the entrance as well as sanitizers.

Liturgical guidelines:

- There may be an entrance procession and recessional at the conclusion of Mass.
- There may be an offertory procession with the gifts of bread and wine. If brought forward in procession, they should be covered. Utilizing the credence table is yet acceptable.
- There may be congregational singing.
- Deacons and/or servers may be used to provide assistance during the Mass. The priest, especially if he is vulnerable, has a right to require assistants to be vaccinated and to use face coverings and refuse assistance at the altar from someone refusing to do so at his request.
- Distribution of Holy Communion in the hand is preferred out of care and reverence for those susceptible to becoming infected which includes concern for a number of vulnerable priests. Communicants who require receiving Holy Communion on the tongue are not to be denied but should be urged to receive last. Priests, deacons, or extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist are to wash and/or sanitize their hands before distributing the Eucharist. While distributing Holy Communion, all ministers are to wear face coverings.

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- The invitation by the celebrant “Peace with you” and the people’s response, “And with your spirit,” should be made. No further physical sign of peace among the assembly is to be offered except among family members. The practice of turning towards others with a simple nod of the head as a sign of solidarity and respect is a preferred means to offer a sign of peace.
- Priests or other ministers are not to wear vinyl gloves while distributing Communion.
- During the celebration of the Mass, when he is presiding at the altar, the priest should not wear a face covering but may choose to wear a clear face shield of some sort. The bread and wine may be covered with a pall and/or purificators.
- Communion with the Precious Blood is not to be offered to the assembly at this time. Priests are required to receive the Precious Blood to fulfill the sacrifice of the Mass. In cases of concelebration, several chalices may be used or priests may self-communicate by intinction.
- For the Communion procession, communicants are to come up in a single file line, If the communicant is wearing a face covering, he/she is to remove it prior to presenting his/herself for reception of Holy Communion.
- Baskets with long handles are acceptable for receiving the collection of funds. An alternative now being used in a number of parishes is to place collection baskets in an accessible and suitable location. The collection may be brought up in an offertory with bread and wine.
- Proper cleaning of frequently touched surfaces in the church should be maintained.
- Parish meetings may take place, such as, a parish council, Bible study class, prayer groups, receptions, etc.
- If holy water fonts are used, they should be refreshed regularly.
- If a priest is particularly vulnerable to infection, he may choose to celebrate the Mass but allow others to distribute Communion.

Communion to the homebound has inherent risks to vulnerable individuals. At the same time, homebound parishioners have particular need of the sacraments. In some cases, a member of the family has been designated to take Communion to a homebound family member. The parish priest may commission a family member to do so but they are to be instructed how to do so properly and reverently. In other cases, a homebound parishioner may not have a family member to take them Communion. As such, parish priests should provide for Communion to the homebound, either by the priest himself or with properly trained Communion ministers. In all cases, such visits are to be made only by those who are fully vaccinated, while maintaining safety measures such as the use of a face covering and sanitizing hands. Obviously, in cases of severe illness, sacramental anointing of the sick should take place. General requests from parishioners to receive Communion at their home is not allowed, given that parish Masses are available. Clergy and lay staff should strive to make regular and personal contact, by phone and other electronic communication to those who are homebound. This includes those in nursing facilities and assisted care living situations that allow visitation.

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If possible, churches are to remain open for parishioners to pray. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is encouraged. Ideally, parishes should provide time and opportunity for Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction. Exposition is not allowed unless someone is present.

Public celebrations of the Sacraments are encouraged. Guidance regarding any restrictions are provided by county-city health departments.

- Baptism of infants may be celebrated. New water is to be used and blessed for each baptism.
- Confirmation with first Communion celebrations are to be scheduled according to the pastor's determination in coordination with the Bishop's Office. **The Bishop is not providing a general designation for pastors as done the previous two years.**
- Adult initiations may be celebrated according to the statutes for the RCIA.
- Weddings may be celebrated, and in some cases may be celebrated out of doors (See Provisional Policy on diocesan website).
- Ample opportunities for the Sacrament of Penance should be maintained.
- Funerals are to be celebrated.
- Anointing of the Sick is to be available, especially to respond to those who are in proximate danger of death and request anointing and viaticum. The directives, procedures and policies of health care facilities must be strictly followed when visiting the sick. The use of an instrument, such as a glove or cotton swab is allowed and may be used for the anointing of a person who has COVID-19. This may require a period of quarantine following the anointing. Check your local county-city guidelines.
- Clergy are encouraged to adopt reasonable and prudent measures to ensure everyone's safety, including their own. **All clergy are encouraged to receive the COVID vaccine** as soon as possible with a strong preference to Pfizer and Moderna vaccines given more serious moral issues with the Johnson and Johnson vaccine. All are encouraged to continue to practice good hygiene and appropriate physical distancing and the use of masks when necessary. Parish staffs who are sick should remain at home and be tested for Covid 19.

*Depending on local conditions and personal circumstances a pastor or parish administrator may make a determination to temporarily require stricter protocols within his parish.