Updated Diocesan Directives for Priests for the Celebration of the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord during the COVID-19 Outbreak

17 November 2020

As the Church looks ahead to the annual celebrations for the Nativity of the Lord, pastors will inevitably face challenges in the midst of the global pandemic.

The diocesan measures adopted in May of this year were overwhelmingly successful in mitigating disease transmission. A recent study, authored in part by Deacon Timothy Flanigan, M.D., concluded that no outbreaks of COVID-19 were linked to church attendance. The study highlights that “this encouraging news should inspire confidence that the guidelines in place – based on CDC recommendations – are working to decrease COVID-19 transmission.” The authors concluded that Catholics should have confidence that it is reasonably safe to return to Mass.

The Church’s festive celebrations during Christmas will not negate this important progress; but such celebrations do pose unique challenges. Unlike Mass celebrated during the summer, when windows were opened and when heavy moisture in the air could reasonably limit the spread of disease, Christmas Masses will be celebrated in winter, when the temperature is colder and the air dryer. Moreover, pastors typically see an exponential increase in the number of parishioners who attend Christmas Mass. Many families also travel to churches other than their own to celebrate Christmas with relatives. Visitors may be unaware of the protocols in the Diocese of Providence. In light of COVID-19, the regular increase in Christmas Mass attendance remains very unpredictable and will vary from parish to parish.

Thus, given the inherent challenges which may surface during the celebration of Christmas Masses, the following guidelines are meant to ensure parishioners can worship safely. These guidelines will be updated and are subject to change to conform with governmental and state health regulations when necessary.

SAFETY DIRECTIVES

1. The same protocols established in May of this year remain in effect regarding hand sanitization, the use of masks, physical distancing, and the reception of Holy Communion. The pastor should remind parishioners and visitors about these requirements.
2. Pastors should advise their congregations through public means that Mass attendance will be limited. As of the publication of these guidelines, Mass attendance must be limited to 50% of the church’s capacity, while observing six feet distance between parishioners. This metric may change as the situation develops. Smaller parishes which have not utilized “sign-ups” or “reservations” may need to do this especially for Christmas.

3. Churches should encourage air ventilation whenever possible. Opening the windows and doors of the church even slightly - or the proper use of HVAC systems - can be helpful.

4. Priests, deacons, and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion may wear masks or face coverings when distributing Holy Communion.

5. Music may still remain a part of Mass. Because of the risk of the spread of aerosolized particles, however, congregational singing should be limited. The use of choirs is discouraged. It is sufficient to have an organist and cantor. Cantors should remain spatially distant according to health and safety guidelines. Instruments which do not pose a risk to the spread of aerosolized particles may be used.

LITURGICAL DIRECTIVES

1. As a reminder, Bishop Tobin continues to dispense Catholics in the Diocese of Providence from the obligation to attend Sunday Masses and other Holy Days of Obligation, which includes the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception (December 8) and the Nativity of the Lord. Thus, nothing should disturb the consciences of those Catholics who choose to remain at home during Christmas. Masses may still be live-streamed. It is sufficient to live-stream one Christmas Mass.

2. Priests should not schedule more Masses than the number they deem to be absolutely necessary. By way of exception this year in light of COVID-19, a priest is permitted to celebrate Mass in anticipation of Christmas beginning at 3:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, in which the Mass for the Vigil of the Nativity of the Lord may licitly be used. Priest are reminded that they are not permitted to celebrate more than three Masses on either Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

3. The liturgical texts for the celebration of Christmas Masses should be used at their proper times. However, any set of readings from the Christmas Masses provided in the Lectionary may be used at any time according to the pastoral needs of each celebration. When selecting the proper orations for a given celebration, the “Vigil Mass” should be used on the evening of December 24, either before or after First Vespers of the Nativity. “Mass during the Night,” “Mass at Dawn,” and “Mass during the Day” all have their proper orations.