

Frequently Asked Questions

(Prepared to assist Pastors, Parish Life Coordinators and Parish Staff Members)

1. What difference does being in the Green Phase in Pennsylvania make for the Diocesan directives? Can we increase to 50% occupancy for Mass?

The liturgical directives remain the same as published on the Diocesan website. Our emphasis remains on six-foot social distancing, which results in about 25% capacity in most worship sites. If a parish wishes to expand opportunities for more people to attend Mass, they should first work towards restoring the full pre-COVID Mass schedule.

2. Diocesan directives indicate that masks need to be worn but could we bypass this for weekday Mass since we have even greater distance between participants?

Wearing face masks is not optional – and the virus is surging again all over the country. We need to follow this practice diligently in all church settings.

3. How do we respond if parishioners say we are not following what President Trump wants us to do?

We are following the guidelines of the Center for Disease Control.

4. At present, most parishes report a small number in attendance at Mass. Should we be encouraging people to attend by stressing the safety measures or simply wait for them to make the choice?

The obligation to attend Sunday Mass still remains suspended at this time. Parishes are certainly encouraged to communicate the safety precautions that are being taken, extending the invitations and means by which they can come to Mass and let them make their own decision.

5. Parishes are having varied success with an advance reservation process – some are discontinuing this, at least for weekday Masses. Is it required that we have a list of persons in attendance? If our reservations are not exceeding the capacity, do we need to continue using this?

Taking reservations is totally up to the discretion of the parish. It was recommended prior to reopening any of our parishes, when we were concerned that people could potentially be turned away at the door. Each parish needs to evaluate how helpful this process is – keeping in mind that numbers of attendees will likely increase, especially with fall start of school.

6. Parishes reported that clearly the main reason attendance may be low for now is that people are generally not feeling that it is safe to gather. How can we provide these assurances and increase the chances that all will eventually return?

Careful and frequent communication about the safety and sanitization procedures will help people feel ready to regather. By viewing livestream Masses, people still at home may be able to observe a positive experience of some people in attendance – along with the word of mouth from those who have attended – which will make it easier.

7. Could we return distribution of Holy Communion back to its proper place in the liturgy for the green phase?

There is no intention to alter the current practice until we see how the apparent surge of the virus in certain areas of the country affects us in the next few weeks. The distribution after Mass supports keeping appropriate social distance and orderly dismissal.

8. Do we have any anticipation of when we might resume singing during Mass?

As long as masks are required to diminish the spread of the virus, we will need to keep singing to a minimum.

9. We have great concern for the homebound who cannot attend any liturgies. Is it permissible now to visit these people and take communion?

The Diocesan guidelines describe the opportunity for Sacrament of the Sick and Holy Communion for persons who are hospitalized and/or homebound. It is assumed that the priest or extraordinary minister will follow all personal protective measures.

10. Since we are now allowing for some outdoor Masses, could we celebrate an outdoor wedding at the venue of the couple's choice?

These situations will need to be addressed on a case-by-case basis, by request to the Bishop. Our churches can indeed accommodate a decent number of family members that can sit together in pews. There have been extenuating circumstances - during this crisis - in response to a grave health concern, that would provide for a couple to be married outside on the church grounds, but these should not be seen as precedent setting.

11. Can we host gatherings in our parish hall – parish and non-parish groups? How do we oversee their safety procedures? What size group can they have? Food, activities?

Parishes each know their own facilities, and whether or how to oversee safety procedures. Maximum social gatherings in Pennsylvania are 250 in the Green Phase, but only where the space still allows for six-foot social distancing. Food preparation could be a concern, especially a buffet type of event.

12. Could I move Mass into a larger space (like school gymnasium) or have a second assembly with livestream into parish hall, to allow for more people to attend?

Yes, so long as the same protocols – social distancing, masks and sanitization – are followed in any space. In addition, if people gather in two parts of the facility, care must be given to entrance and exit routes, as well as reducing socializing before or after Mass.

13. We are getting calls about the neighboring parish – that they are not following any safety requirements. How can this be monitored and addressed? Does each parish just get to make their own decisions about these procedures?

No, while each parish may approach the reopening process differently in terms of Mass schedules, dates, etc., each parish does NOT get to make its own decisions about safety requirements. The Diocese has received concerns and has addressed them with the parishes in question.

14. We see that some parishes are completing celebrations of First Communion and Confirmation – what is still required in terms of the formation of the candidates prior to the celebration, since we missed weeks of religious education?

People have a right to the sacraments. So long as basic formation has taken place, even if months ago, it is recommended that parishes celebrate First Communion and Confirmation as soon as possible.

15. Some of my parishioners are asking to delay First Communion or Confirmation until it can “happen in the normal way.” How should I respond to this? When will this be?

In conversation with families, try to focus more on the heart of the sacrament vs. the outfits, processions, etc. that so often become the focus of such an event. We simply don’t know when this will happen in the normal way and those children have a right to these important sacraments.

16. Teams for greeting and cleaning are getting tired. How can we inspire them to continue this important volunteer work? How long will this be necessary?

The greatest inspiration that volunteers can take is to see this as a selfless service for the sake of their brothers and sisters. We must assume that these preventive measures will need to continue as long as it takes to develop and administer a vaccine. Parishes may wish to create multiple teams who can take shifts – either by being assigned to a certain Mass only, or certain week of the month, for example.

17. What do we do if we learn of a confirmed case of COVID-19 in our parish community? If this person has been in attendance or on-site at Church? If this person is a staff member?

If this person is attending Mass or working on staff, inform them that they must refrain from engaging the public and quarantine until they are well. The parish community should be informed that “someone” has tested positive and attended a certain mass or was in the office area on certain dates, etc. It is neither necessary nor appropriate to use the person’s name publicly.

18. How do we create parish budgets for the new fiscal year when so many items (collection levels, fundraising efforts, investment income) are still very much up in the air?

Each parish will need to create its budget in the best way it can, recognizing that certain elements of it will likely need to be adjusted mid-way through the year. Bear in mind that

the Diocese will be reviewing assessments at the end of the summer and adjusting them where needed, based on income.

19. What are some strategies I can use when my church attendance is at or above 25% capacity and I have to turn people away? How could we begin planning for this increase in attendance, perhaps come fall with return to school?

With the Green Phase and continued positive movement, we will begin to assess the possibility of adjusting our capacity percentage, with the understanding that appropriate social distancing will still be necessary.

20. With an uptick of the virus in areas that have recently reopened, what do we do if this occurs in our area? Will we return to more restrictive phases of mitigation? Who decides when and whether this will happen?

The Diocese of Scranton will move cautiously and continue to make adjustments based on the CDC, PA Department of Health, and our own assessment of how best to respond to changing circumstances. The best approach is prevention, which is why it is so important to stay the course right now.