



Sacramental & Other Considerations for the Diocese of Norwich in Response to the Coronavirus Pandemic

March 18, 2020

As publicly announced on Tuesday March 17, 2020 by the Most Reverend Michael R. Cote, Bishop of Norwich, in light of the recommendations of healthcare professionals and Governor Ned Lamont's Executive Order (No. 7D) requiring the closure of all restaurants, bars, gyms, and movie theaters and the prohibition of civic, social, and recreational gatherings of 50 people or more, including religious, spiritual, or worship gatherings of such size, the Diocese of Norwich has cancelled all weekend and weekday Masses, effective Tuesday, March 17, 2020, in the churches of the Diocese (the counties of Middlesex, New London, Tolland, and Wyndham, and Fisher Island, New York) until further notice. Priests will celebrate a daily Mass with no congregation, remembering in prayer all who are affected by the pandemic. Pastors will be encouraged to make provision for their churches to be open during the day so individuals can still come and pray and make an Act of Spiritual Communion with the Lord.

The present document is meant to provide further specificity and guidance, and the Diocese will continue to issue updates as further questions and new developments arise, particularly with regard to Holy Week and Easter.

Priest(s) Celebrating Mass

Every priest should continue to offer a daily Mass, preferably at the main altar of the closed church, and with no congregation, however small. If it is a concelebration by more than one priest present, care should be taken about sharing the chalice, purifying the vessels and changing the linens.

In parishes where Mass intentions have already been set for a given day, the daily Mass of the priest(s) should be offered for that intention. If no intention is scheduled, then it would be very appropriate for the Mass to be offered "*pro populo*," for the parishioners, with a prayer for their health and the strengthening of their faith. As a reminder, all pastors have the obligation of applying a Mass "*pro populo*," for the people, every Sunday and all Holy Days of Obligation.

In light of the suspension of public celebration of Mass, Mass intentions for multiple Masses scheduled on particular days can be combined into a single offering, but only by explicitly informing the donor beforehand and obtaining the donor's consent to combine this offering with other intentions into a single Mass. Collective Mass intentions are permitted to occur not more than twice a week. Mass intentions that cannot be combined and are not able to be offered at this time should be rescheduled for a later date. The priest is permitted only one stipend for the Mass offered. The other stipends are to be submitted to the Chancery for "the purposes prescribed by the ordinary" (c. 951).

Open Churches

Although no public Masses are to be celebrated during this period, the faithful should not be totally deprived of the opportunity to visit a church and pray before the Blessed Sacrament, meditate on the Stations of the Cross or to venerate particular sacred images of our Lady or the saints to whom they have particular devotion.

Therefore, pastors should make a prudent judgment about opening the church for a period of time during the day in which parishioners can make a private visit. Possible means of publicizing these hours can include: posting on the door or by means of the internet and social media. The schedule for opening a church will no doubt vary from place to place. Nothing should be done to facilitate or encourage large groups of people, and social distancing reminders should be made. In addition, Pastors must follow sanitizing guidelines that have been issued in recent days and make provision for regular cleaning/sanitizing of their churches, with particular attention paid to commonly touched surfaces such as door handles, etc. Please be advised that it may become necessary to make further restrictions in order to comply with civil recommendations regarding social distancing and the maximum number that should gather in one place.

It is also very desirable that there be Eucharistic adoration, but without ceremony and without announcing it in such a way that a large group of people would come at any one time. Adoration is a fitting opportunity for priests themselves to spend time in prayer interceding for our nation and world at a time of crisis. The silent presence of a priest in prayer would be a great encouragement to those who come to pray themselves. Pastors must ensure that the Blessed Sacrament is never left unattended when exposed for Adoration.

Spontaneous vocal prayers may arise from those present in the church at a given time, but no devotions (stations, novenas, rosaries) should be preannounced in a way that draws a larger group of people at one time

Live Streaming, Television, and Radio

While Masses are to be celebrated without any congregation, priests are free to stream their Mass online for the benefit of their parishioners if the parish has the ability to do so.

All priests are strongly encouraged, with whatever means are available to them, to inform their weekday and weekend parishioners about the television Mass broadcast each day by the Archdiocese of Hartford's Office of Radio & Television. The television Mass is broadcast seven days a week. Please check local listings for times and stations. The Mass from ORTV can also be found streaming live at 10:00 a.m. 7 days a week on <http://www.ortv.org/streaming/streaming.htm>. Links to additional streamed Masses can be found on the Diocesan website www.norwichdiocese.org/coronavirus. This website will continue to be updated.

In addition, Mass can be heard from the Cathedral of St. Patrick in Norwich on Sunday mornings at 9 a.m. on radio station WICH AM 1310.

If your parish is planning to stream Mass, or other prayers and devotions, please send this information to the Office of Communications by email editorial@norwichdiocese.net.

Contributions

Though parishioners are unable to attend Mass during this period, it goes without saying that their continuing financial support of the parish is crucial for its ongoing operation and obligations to employees, etc. This is also true of the Diocese. Even if parishioners are simply holding on to their weekly envelopes with the intention of turning them all in when Masses resume, this does not solve the parish's need to meet its obligations in the meantime.

Pastors are invited to share ideas on ways to facilitate the weekly offerings of parishioners and support for the church at this time, in keeping with sound financial practice as set forth in governmental and Diocesan regulations, and also with great sensitivity to the financial hardships that the epidemic may cause for some people and the grief and sadness that will inevitably arise from the deaths of those who succumb to it.

One simple and very effective way of facilitating contributions in these weeks is through online giving, which makes it possible for parishioners to contribute to the parish from anywhere at any time. Encouraging online giving is a significant way of increasing contributions even apart from the challenges posed by the current pandemic.

The Annual Catholic Appeal has been postponed until later this year, most likely in June. The Office of Development will be in touch regarding a new date once the health issues of the pandemic have been resolved and the public celebration of Mass has resumed.

Funerals

At this time, Masses of Christian Burial are permitted. The Funeral Mass may only be celebrated in private and attended by immediate family members and necessary participants, while not exceeding the limits established by the civil authorities. The celebration of the Funeral Rites must observe the health precautions established and recommended by the Diocese of Norwich and the State of Connecticut. In all obituaries, funerals should be listed as “private” and the date, time and location of the Mass and/or Committal should not be publicized.

Additionally, wake services at funeral homes are not to be recommended. Priests are allowed to celebrate the “Rite of Committal with Final Commendation” at the graveside. Alternatively, families may choose to have a simple graveside service and schedule a Memorial Mass at a later date in your parish, once regular Masses have resumed so that a greater number of people can attend.

Again, participation at such services should be limited to immediate family and close friends only, and their number must be in keeping with the limits established by the civil authorities. It is our understanding that the State of Connecticut has communicated guidelines to Funeral Directors concerning the services that they can offer, consistent with the above. Please contact your local Funeral Directors to communicate these directives to them so that they can facilitate the planning process with families accordingly. Please also note that the Funeral Directors will have the responsibility of limiting the participants at any funeral ceremonies, whether a Mass or at the graveside, and it will likewise be their responsibility to encourage attendees to observe proper protocols for “social distancing.”

Weddings

The celebration of weddings, within or outside Mass, may continue if the couple does not wish to reschedule. The number of participants must be limited to immediate family and regulated in keeping with the limits established by the civil authorities. Proper protocols regarding “social distancing” must also be applied.

Sacrament of Penance

Pastorally it is important that the faithful not be denied access to the Sacrament of Penance. Regularly scheduled Confession times should continue to be offered, but only with individual confessions and no penance services. Every precaution should be taken to ensure “social distancing” between priest and penitent, preferably with a screen between them rather than face to face. That screen should be sufficiently covered (e.g. filters, coverings, etc.) to create a safe barrier between the priest and penitent.

Due to the need for these added precautions, our Diocesan “Time for the Lord” celebrations scheduled to be held in each Deanery of the Diocese on Friday, March 21, 2020 are cancelled. Pastors are to ensure that the faithful have adequate access to the Sacrament of Confession in their parishes, particularly during the Lenten and Easter seasons.

Baptisms

If parents would rather not delay the Baptism of their child, it may take place in church, but the number of participants should be limited to the parents, godparents, and immediate family in keeping with the limits established by the civil authorities.

Anointing of the Sick and Pastoral Visits to the Homebound

As noted in prior communications, all Priests have the grave responsibility of ministering to the sick and the dying by providing them with the Sacraments of the Church. However, it is also incumbent on the clergy to protect their own health. This means following with extreme care the directives of health care professionals with regard to protective masks and clothing in approaching those who are stricken with the virus and being cautious with anyone who are ill or infirm. Older priests and those with compromised health should avoid ministering to the sick during the pandemic if at all possible.

In administering the Sacrament of the Sick to the infirm, great care should be taken not to contaminate the Oil of the Sick. A repeated dipping of the thumb in the oil for forehead and hands risks such contamination. Since priests themselves can bless the Oil of the Sick, cotton balls dipped in oil can be blessed using the prayer in the ritual, and then used individually and disposed of afterward in an appropriate way, even by the hospital itself.

In light of the dangers posed by the pandemic, only priests and deacons should conduct any pastoral visits to the homebound (outside of emergency situations) if, in the judgment of the Pastor, it is necessary to do so, exercising great caution and “social distancing.” Any number of televised or online Catholic programs, including Mass, can be recommended to the homebound who routinely receive the Blessed Sacrament at home.

RCIA

In light of the suspension of public Masses, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults may need to be adapted. Rituals of the Period of Purification and Enlightenment, including the Scrutinies and Presentations, are not to be celebrated at this time. For further information or directives as to how to proceed with RCIA please contact the Chancery or the Office of Faith Events.

Meetings and Events

Priests are asked to keep any parish meetings to an absolute minimum and in keeping with the limits established by the civil authorities and the need for social distancing.

Diocesan Offices

At this time, the Chancery and all Diocesan Offices remain open, but they are closed to the public and all large meetings have been cancelled or rescheduled. Please feel free to communicate with Diocesan offices and ministries by telephone or email and our staff will do their best to respond to all communications received in a timely way.

Diocesan Schools

In response to the March 15th mandate of Governor Ned Lamont requiring the closure of all Connecticut schools through at least March 31st, all Catholic elementary and high schools in the Diocese of Norwich will also be closed until further notice.

Your understanding and cooperation are appreciated in keeping up with the many updates that have been issued in recent days and in abiding by what healthcare professionals and experts, the state of Connecticut, and the Diocese have laid down to be followed. As the situation continues to develop, you will be kept updated. If you wish to reference the documents and guidelines that have been issued, please go to www.norwichdiocese.org/coronavirus.