

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

This past week the Diocese of Wilmington issued updated guidelines in response to the rising numbers of positive Covid-19 cases in our area. I present them below with my own notes in red:

Clergy and volunteers are STRONGLY ENCOURAGED, to obtain COVID-19 vaccinations and boosters. I, Deacon Charlie and Deacon Dave have all been fully vaccinated (at least by today's definition) and have received our boosters. Clergy who assist from time to time have also been fully vaccinated.

Clergy and Liturgical ministers at all parishes are encouraged to wear masks, except when speaking publicly. While the Diocese is "encouraging" this, I am asking that all our liturgical ministers see this as a "directive." Only the presiding priest will be exempt, since he is speaking throughout most of the Mass.

Parishes are to encourage all attendees to be masked while attending Mass. I realize that many of you have begun to wear masks in church again, even though it has not been required. For the time being, I think that's a prudent decision. For those who have not been wearing a mask at Mass, whether you are vaccinated or not, I encourage you to start wearing a mask inside the church building.

Mass attendees over the age of 5 who are not vaccinated for COVID-19 **must** wear a mask. This is serious guidance from the Diocese, and I urge you to take it seriously. If you are not vaccinated, you must wear a mask while inside the church building. This also applies to unvaccinated children ages 5 and up. Children under the age of 5 do not need to wear a mask.

No parish should be checking the vaccine status of those attending Mass, but rely on the individual's compliance with these guidelines. In other words, we depend on you to honor the diocese's protocols.

Ministries and non-liturgical parish activities should be carefully evaluated and, if possible, held virtually or with limited contact. This effort includes third-party use of facilities, such as Scouts, community groups, etc. Parishes should consider rescheduling in-person social gatherings scheduled for January or February to later in the year. At least through the end of February, there will be no meetings held on our property. The church will be open for sacraments and for prayer.

Parishes should carefully evaluate the safety of continuing with choirs. If parishes determine the choir can safely perform, then their use should continue. If a parish deems it unwise to continue with choirs, then only a single cantor should be used. For the time being, we will continue with the ministry of a single cantor at each weekend Mass.

Clergy and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion must carefully adhere to

proper hand sanitization following the distribution of communion on the tongue. At the same time, I am asking that all people who receive Holy Communion at Mass consider receiving in the hands. When a person receives on the tongue, the minister must then pause the line in order to sanitize his or her hands. Sometimes several people in a row receive on the tongue; please consider the minister and the effects of repeated sanitizing on his/her hands. Also consider the stress you might be putting on the minister who has no idea whether or not you are vaccinated or have momentarily non-apparent symptoms. We are living in strange times – but they are temporary. Please help us out. The choice remains yours.

Parishes may continue to make holy water available in fonts. We're ahead of the game here; in April of 2021 we installed "touchless" Holy Water dispensers.

Filled hand sanitizing dispensers should be available at entrances. You'll find sanitizer near the main entrances of the church. All the same, I encourage you to bring your own small bottles of sanitizer, if possible, and use that. If you are out shopping and see a good deal on hand sanitizer – and would like to buy and donate some to the parish – feel welcome to do so.

Clergy should be mindful about social distancing and hand shaking when greeting parishioners before and after Mass. We are a warm and affectionate parish, and many of us are in the habit of greeting each other with an embrace. For the time being, let's hold off on that. In addition, as a temporary measure we will not observe the optional "exchange of peace." I will still offer you the peace of the Lord, and you will still offer it back to me, but for the time being members of the Assembly will not exchange it with each other. This is temporary. Now, a word about holding hands during the "Our Father": Over a year ago, this liturgically incorrect practice was abandoned in the Diocese of Wilmington. We announce that before every weekend Mass. Still, there's a bit of hand-holding that still takes place. I usually assume that this is being done by people who have come in late and have not heard the announcements before the beginning of Mass. Please do not hold hands during the Lord's Prayer; at that moment, we are focusing on Our Father and not on each other. Holding hands causes our bodies to be acting differently from what our souls and voices are trying to do.

Parishes may wish to consider devoting a section of the pews for those who would prefer socially distanced seating, reserving every other pew, etc. With the current number of people attending each Mass, there seems to be sufficient space for people who wish to remain socially distant, *especially towards the front of the church (hint).*

Each parish should effectively communicate safety measures to parishioners and visitors. I'm publishing this in our bulletin this weekend and have sent it out to participants in our "remind.com" system already. Copies will also be available in the Gathering Space.

Please pray for our bishop and for all our priests and deacons. A number of our priests

have recently had to deal with Covid-19 themselves, along with other health-related issues. Given the small size of our presbyterate, this can be seriously problematic, especially in a year when one of our relatively young pastors is on medical leave and another has recently been deployed to Qatar for military service. Pray for an increase in priestly vocations, too, as well as for relief from this virus.

God bless you, always!

Rev. Joseph MPR Cocucci, KHS
Pastor