

May 12, 2020

Dear Parishioners of St. Michael, St. Joseph, and Most Sacred Heart,

***May the Peace and Joy of the Risen Christ
continue to be with you and your families!***

Governor John Bel Edwards is moving the State of Louisiana into **Phase I** reopening as of Friday, May 15, 2020. Bishop Michael Duca, as Bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge has communicated to all the faithful of our diocese what that means for us as Catholics of this Diocese. So here is my way of applying the Governor's and Bishop's directives for the Catholic Church in East St. James Civil Parish.

First and foremost, this is a partial reopening with ongoing protocols for behavior. All citizens and all Catholics must be mindful not only of their own health, but equally show concern for the health of the people around them. These protocols, which might seem like restrictions on personal freedom and the right of conscience to choose for one's self, are in place to protect all people as best we can. I deeply implore everyone reading and/or hearing these words to recognize our highest moral obligation is to treat every person, yourself included, as a beloved child of God.

Please note that even as we reopen for the public celebration of Sunday and Daily Masses, Bishop Duca has made this statement the most important of all:

The Sunday Mass obligation continues to be dispensed for all Catholics indefinitely.

Those who are ill or who are not feeling well in any way should not attend Mass until they are free of their illness and its symptoms for three days. Those who are especially vulnerable (namely, those defined by the Center for Disease Control as those 60 years of age or older, those with compromised immune systems, and/or those with underlying health conditions), and indeed anyone who does not feel comfortable attending Mass is encourage to stay home. Where possible, Sunday and Daily Masses will continue to be streamed for those who are not yet comfortable, for any reason, with returning to a public Mass.

This dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass has been in place since March 17, 2020. Therefore, no Catholic has committed a mortal sin by failing to attend Sunday Mass since that date. Even now, regardless of what reason a person has for not attending Sunday Mass, by decree of the Bishop, no person can commit a mortal sin by staying home! This remains the truth until Bishop Duca re-institutes the Sunday obligation for the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

Yet, it is time to begin to offer Mass open to the public for our personal spiritual improvement and the improvement of our society as a whole. **So, for those who are ready and able to attend Mass, the weekend of May 16/17th, we are returning to our usual weekend and weekday schedule:**

Saturday Vigil Masses: 4:00pm at St. Joseph, Paulina; 6:00pm at St. Michael, Convent

Sunday Masses: 7:00am at St. Michael; 9:00am at St. Joseph;
11:00am at Sacred Heart, Gramercy; and 5:00pm at Sacred Heart

Weekday Masses: 8:15am, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, at Prompt Succor, Lucher
5:45am and 5:15pm, Wednesday, at Prompt Succor

The following protocols are in place for **all Masses, weekends and weekdays**, as long as we remain in Phase I, a partial reopening of the State.

1. **FACE MASKS:** Everyone entering the church MUST be wearing a face mask and must keep the mask on at all times, even when approaching to receive Communion.

If for any reason a person cannot or refuses to wear a mask, that individual is invited **NOT** to enter church but to follow a televised or internet streamed Mass at home. **There will be no exceptions to this protocol.** *“My mask protects you; your mask protects me!”*

Any person, young child or otherwise, who might not understand the need to keep the mask on, is likewise invited not to enter the church. This might require a family member / caretaker to stay home with such a person.

We are not imposing a minimum nor maximum age restriction upon those coming to Mass. Yet, we trust individuals and families to know what is appropriate.

2. **SANITIZERS:** People are encouraged to bring personal sanitizers (wipes, sprays, other) with them as a precaution, especially to be used before approaching Communion. Please be mindful: **Do Not Touch** anything except the space where you will be to attend Mass.
3. **SEATING:** Each church has been arranged to keep the 6 foot social distance requirement for those attending Mass. Blue Painter’s Tape on the backs of pews designate what places within which pews can be used. **NO ONE IS ALLOWED TO SIT IN A NON-DESIGNATED PEW.**

The State protocol for public gatherings is 25% of capacity during Phase I. However, the “social distance” protocol reduces the capacity of each church below this 25%.

Sacred Heart in Gramercy has a capacity of 96 people, (16 pairs and 16 families of four)
Prompt Succor in Lutchter has a capacity of 79, (7 individuals and 36 pairs)
St. Joseph in Paulina has a capacity of 140, (42 pairs and 14 families of four)
St. Michael in Convent has a capacity of 132, (22 pairs and 22 families of four)

Please note: spaces marked for a “pair” could certainly be used by an individual. Also couples might be placed in a family space if necessary. These adjustments will be made as needed.

IMPORTANT This seating restriction points out something very important: **YOU MUST GET TO CHURCH EARLY ENOUGH**, or you might not be able to enter at all! Once the social distance occupancy has reached its maximum level, all other persons will be directed to return home and try to attend a later Mass. No one will be allowed to stand and/or occupy a non-designated pew space. No one will be allowed to enter church once Mass begins.

Churches will be open 45 minutes before the scheduled time for Mass to begin. Remember 6 foot social distancing applies in the parking lot and while waiting to enter church.

4. **ENTRANCE:** Only **one door** for each church can be used as an entrance. This allows for better control of limited seating capacity. All other doors are *non-entrances*. These doors can and will be used as exits; they will not be locked as per fire safety code. Volunteers will be stationed at all church doors to direct people to the correct entrance.

5. **WHERE TO SIT:** Once inside the church, “hospitality” volunteers will show congregants where to sit. Please be mindful that most people will not be sitting where they “normally” sit. Please be kind enough to sit where you are directed. We ask everyone’s patience with this protocol. Cry-rooms and choir lofts **ARE NOT OPEN** for congregation seating at this time. There is **no exception** to this, even for crying babies.
6. **WORSHIP AIDS:** No missalettes nor hymnals will be available at this time to protect from possible cross-contamination. Parishioners are invited to bring their own books if they wish.
7. **OFFERTORY BASKETS** will be placed at the doors of the church for collections, one or two baskets depending on the number of collections for the weekend. People can drop in their offering upon entering or leaving the church. NO collections will be “passed” during Phase I. People are encouraged to continue On-Line giving, to mail their offerings, or to place their envelopes in the Drop Box at the Pastoral Center in Paulina.
8. **NO HAND CONTACT:** Hand-shaking for the Sign of Peace or hand-holding for the Our Father is not to take place between different household groupings.
9. **HOLY COMMUNION:** *It is extremely important that everyone understand the procedure to receive Holy Communion so we can minimize the risk of spreading the virus.*
 - a. After the Celebrant self-communicates, he must re-sanitize his hands, place a mask on his face, and begin the distribution of Holy Communion. The Precious Blood in the Communion Cup will not be distributed at this time.
 - b. Communicants are **STRONGLY ENCOURAGED to receive Communion in the hand.** You must use your personal hand sanitizer before coming forward for Communion. Please Note: Those who choose to receive Communion on the tongue are allowed to do so but must wait until all other communicants have received. See “f.” below.
 - c. Hospitality volunteers will enter the center aisle at Communion time to indicate when it is time for the next individual or household to process for Communion. There will be only one line for Communion, and the Eucharist will be distributed only by the Celebrant. There are tape lines on the floor (or pews) of the center aisle to assist in keeping the 6 foot social distance between communicants.
 - d. Each person will come forward, still wearing his/her mask, extend their arms forward with their *hands cupped*, ready to receive Communion.

The priest will bring the Host as close as possible to the person’s hands *without touching*, and gently drop the Host onto the palm of the person’s hand. [Notice: If the priest makes physical contact with the hands of the communicant, the priest must re-sanitize his hands before continuing to distribute the Eucharist!]

If the communicant does not have his/her hands ready, the priest will instruct the person to extend their arms and cup their hands to receive. If the person cannot comply, the priest will offer a blessing, instead of the Eucharist, and the person will be asked to return to their pew.

- e. After receiving the Host in his/her hand, the communicant will walk six feet away from the Communion Station, remove the mask, place the Eucharist into their mouth, re-mask, and then continue walking back to the pew.
 - f. Any persons wishing to receive the Eucharist on the tongue must wait until all other communicants have received. The priest must sanitize his hands prior to offering Communion on the tongue. If there are multiple persons wishing to receive on the tongue, the priest will re-sanitize in between each communicant.
 - g. After the last person receives Communion, the priest will sanitize his hands, gather the remaining Hosts, and repose them in the Tabernacle.
10. **DISMISSAL:** As the Recessional Hymn is being played, Hospitality volunteers will assist the congregation to exit the church, **ONE PEW AT A TIME**, to help maintain required social distance. **Patience on the part of EVERYONE will be essential at this time because the 6 foot rule must be followed within the church and throughout the parking lot as well.**

Please consider this, my personal recommendation, for attending Mass: because no one is under a “penalty of sin” obligation to attend Sunday Mass, those who are able to pick a weekday Mass as their One-Mass-per-week to attend, please allow others who CANNOT go to Mass except on Saturday or Sunday that chance. I know there are more people who want to receive Holy Communion than our churches can hold under these restrictions. But we have 12 Eucharistic Liturgies in the seven day week between all our locations. If each person picks one and only one, this will give the greatest opportunity to the most people to reconnect with Jesus in the Eucharist. Please think about your hunger for the Eucharist as the hunger of your fellow Catholics as well.

Other elements of Phase I partial reopening:

1. **Perpetual Adoration Chapels** will not be reopened at this time; this is for the entire Diocese of Baton Rouge. Bishop Duca has a concern with the closed-in space of most chapels and that people, without monitoring, might forget about social distance. We will announce when it is possible to return to perpetual Adoration.

For those who cannot yet return to Mass but want time in church before the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle, we will continue to have St. Michael in Convent and Prompt Succor Chapel in Lutcher open on Sundays from 8:00am to 12:00noon for private prayer. Please continue to follow the sanitation and seating protocols in place by the entry doors.

2. **Sacrament of Reconciliation:** Bishop Duca is allowing us to schedule Confession times as long as this takes place in a well ventilated space where social distancing can be maintained.

Because the Reconciliation Rooms in our parishes are too small for social distancing, we will be scheduling Reconciliation at the Lutcher Chapel utilizing the Adoration Chapel for a Confessional. (This does not contradict the Bishop’s decision not to reopen Adoration chapels because the Priest-confessor will monitor social distance during the Sacrament.)

Reconciliation Times: Saturdays: 10:00 - 11:00am; 2:00 - 3:00pm.
Sundays: 2:00 - 3:00pm.

Penitents will enter the main body of the Lutcher Chapel for prayer, utilizing the pew spaces marked with blue tape. On the floor of the main aisle will be blue tape Xs (6 feet apart) to assist with lining up but keeping social distance. The Confessor will be in the Adoration Chapel proper, and each penitent will enter and leave through the glass door separating the body of the church from the Adoration entrance. Signs on site will explain the procedure.

3. **Masses for Weddings and Funerals** are still prohibited at this time. Bishop Duca wants everyone to become familiar and comfortable with the “new” norm for Masses – Sundays and weekdays – before re-starting these special Masses. The current protocol – *immediate family only* – for wedding ceremonies in church and burial rituals in cemeteries remains in effect.
4. **Baptisms** can be scheduled on a family-by-family basis with the current restriction of immediate family only in place. This will be explained in detail to those families seeking infant baptism.
5. **RCIA** remains “on hold” until future decisions are made by the Bishop.
6. **Anointing of the Sick:** Only in immediate danger of death is a priest allowed to administer the Sacrament of Anointing, following whatever medical protocols are in place for that particular person. Prayers for other sick or distressed persons can and will be offered without anointing while observing social distancing protocols.
7. **Communion to the Homebound:** Similar to the Sacrament of Anointing, in danger of death, a priest can bring *viaticum* to the dying person. However, the regular visiting of the sick and distribution of Communion to the homebound remains “on hold” until future decisions.
8. **Pastoral Center Office Hours:** Beginning Monday, May 18th, the Pastoral Center will be open again, Monday through Friday, 8:00am to 4:00pm. However, anyone entering the Pastoral Center will be required to wear a face mask; any staff member interacting with the public face-to-face is also obliged to wear a face mask.

A final word: Everyone, myself included, certainly wants all of these restrictions to be removed as soon as possible. We are all suffering the consequences of COVID-19, regardless of being infected by it or not. No one knows definitely how to prevent this infection yet, so we must continue doing our part to slow its spread. And because there are so many asymptomatic carriers, without these restrictions and protocols we risk a renewed outbreak of the virus. As you have heard, more times than any of us can count: we each need to do our part and patiently persevere.

I am thrilled to return to public Mass, even if restricted in attendance, and hope Phase I will last only a short time before more extensive reopening can take place. Let us continue to pray for each other and our whole world. This is a great test, but with faith in God, I am sure humanity will be all the better for it.

God bless you all,

Fr. Vincent