



Diocese of Rockford

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Office of the Bishop

May 13, 2020

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

For the last eight weeks we have been faced with unprecedented challenges in our faith and in our lives. An unseen and previously unknown contagion has broken out among us and, in Illinois, has claimed over 3,600 lives according to the Illinois Department of Public Health. Others who have survived the coronavirus have gone through great suffering, and the future holds enormous financial challenges for families and individuals who have lost jobs, savings and a life time of work and savings.

On March 17, 2020, I wrote to you noting, “First and foremost, we are people of faith. Our lives of prayer, the sacraments and the practice of our faith come together as our witness to the gift of faith. In that context, the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” (Lumen Gentium 11). At the same time, as citizens we are participants in our society and so we bear our responsibility to contribute to the common good.”

In that context I announced that in order to help slow and hopefully stop the spread of the coronavirus among us, the public celebration of the Mass was to be temporarily suspended. Other limitations, in order to follow the guidance of health officials, were also announced and we have been living that spiritual sacrifice for the last two months.

Today, I write to inform you that we are taking the first steps toward gradually reopening the public celebration of the Mass in the Diocese of Rockford. I do so consistent with the announcement of Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago who stated today, “I am heartened to announce that we have reached an agreement with the Office of the Governor on a multi-phase Plan for re-opening our churches for the celebration of the sacraments, private prayer, adoration and Mass.”

Attached you will find an executive summary as well as some details of a two-stage plan for reopening as agreed upon by the Bishops of Illinois. A specific plan adapted to the particular needs of the Diocese of Rockford, and which seeks to ensure the health and safety of all who take part in the Mass and the celebration of the sacraments, will be released shortly.

Our goal at this point is to begin to celebrate Mass in the presence of the faithful, consistent with the guidelines for gatherings, on Monday, May 25. That will be subject to the ability of each parish to fulfill the necessary conditions.

As we begin this important process, I ask for your patience and for your prayers. We have reached a point where reopening is possible because of great sacrifice by all of us. The nature of the virus suggests that there may still be ups and downs in our struggle to return to public life. If we are not cautious and prudent, we are told that the virus could break out again, undoing all of the sacrifices that have been made.

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Above all, our goal is to begin again to safely and publicly practice our faith. This is indeed an essential aspect of our lives. Even if we are only at the beginning, how good it is to be able to open our hearts and our parish doors, both to meet Christ in prayer and the sacraments.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ *David J. Malloy*

Most Reverend David J. Malloy
Bishop of Rockford

Attachment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document is an Executive Summary of the multi-phased protocols and procedures, known as the Plan, for reopening churches and resuming public participation in the sacramental life of the Church for the Catholic dioceses in Illinois. The full Plan is provided at the end of this Executive Summary. The Plan has been developed by the bishops of the Chicago Province in consultation with and the approval of state and local public health officials and civil authorities.

Four guiding principles undergird the multi-phased Plan:

1. Everything possible should be done to provide people the solace of the church's sacramental life in a timely and reasonable way.
2. The current situation in Illinois remains dangerous and fragile. While much has been achieved, there remains the potential that the gains could be lost by a second more virulent wave.
3. Trust needs to be established that the top priority in any Plan is the safety and wellbeing of people. We cannot take for granted that people will return just because churches are reopened.
4. Calling people to exercise faithful citizenship will be key. Each Catholic will need to take personal responsibility for the common good as well as their own safety.

With these principles in mind, a Plan to prudently and gradually resume the full scope of public sacramental celebrations, liturgies and faith practices, has been designed. The Plan envisions a set of required measures and phases. There will be an ongoing review of the Plan so that adjustments are made in accord with new data. The basics of the Plan are as follows:

1. A robust **communications** effort to inform parishes and parishioners of the Plan and any updates to it.
2. Each parish needs to **recruit** non-vulnerable volunteers at the parish level to assist the pastor in implementing the Plan.
3. The selected volunteers are to complete **training** by way of a webinar. The training will begin the week of May 18.
4. A required **certification** of readiness to reopen will be required of each parish at each phase. Each parish is to complete an implementation template confirming completion of all action steps and demonstrating that there are a sufficient number of trained volunteers to execute it.
5. **Phase I** allows for parishes to reopen for Baptism, Reconciliation, Weddings and Funerals with a limit of 10 attendees.
6. **Phase IA** allows for parishes to reopen for private prayer and adoration with a limit of 10 attendees. Given the training schedule noted above, it is anticipated that all parishes, if they choose to do so, could be opened by May 23 for Phase I and by May 30 for Phase IA.
7. **Phase II** allows for reopening for weekday and weekend Masses for larger groups depending on the guidelines from the state and the capacity of the church building.
8. Through ongoing discussions with pastors, health care professionals and civil authorities, there will be a **review** of the Plan at each stage with an eye to making adjustments in accord with new data.

MULTI-PHASED PLAN FOR REOPENING CHURCHES

PHASE I: Limited Sacramental Celebrations and Private Prayer

Parish Actions and Responsibilities

- The pastor will need the assistance of the parish community, as he will be required to create a parish leadership team consisting of 6 people, including himself, to co-manage operations and to supervise cleaning, set-up and greeting.
- The parish business manager or someone designated by the pastor will serve as the compliance manager for the parish and assist with the submission of necessary compliance forms.
- The entire team of leaders is required to attend training and submit an implementation template for reopening, which needs to be reviewed and certified by the archdiocese or respective diocese.
- The parish will need to maintain an on-going procurement program for safety and cleaning supplies.
- Based on go-forward approval, each parish will have the prerogative to offer Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals, and Reconciliation in the church within the current limit of 10 attendees excluding ministers and on-site staff (“Phase I”).
- With additional preparation, each parish may optionally offer Eucharistic Adoration and private prayer times (“Phase IA”). In choosing to do so, parish leadership teams must comply with all published bishops’ guidelines outlining precautions preparing for, during and after the rite(s).

NOTE: During Phase I, parishes will not be allowed to offer either daily or Sunday Mass, even with 10 or fewer attendees. The resumption of public Mass, regardless of the number of attendees, is a more complex process, which requires the input of lessons that will be learned from Phase I. To that end, parishes and archdiocese or diocese will collaborate to gather data to improve the protocols and processes of the Plan before we move to worship services in Phase II.

Archdiocesan/ Diocesan Actions and Responsibilities

The archdiocese or diocese, depending on capacity, will provide the following services to support the parishes and pastors:

- Provide parishes information on securing supplies or a list of preferred vendors for supplies throughout the phases of the Plan.
- Conduct required training webinars for clergy, parish leaders and volunteers, to assist the pastor in managing the Plan in each phase. The Archdiocese of Chicago will develop a standard webinar based on these guidelines and make it available to the other dioceses in the Chicago Province.
- Create and distribute to parishes a video message from the local bishop to explain the Plan for reopening churches.

- Evaluate and certify parish proposals for opening during the phases. Create a dedicated email box that will be monitored by staff to answer questions or otherwise support parishes that feel they cannot open safely without additional help.
- Gather and evaluate data from parishes on their Phase I and IA experience to adapt Phase II protocols for larger numbers, which will include public Mass.
- Work with government officials to explore possible increases in crowd size taking into consideration the capacity of church buildings.

PHASE II: Resumption of Public Masses

Parish Actions and Responsibilities

In Phase II parishes may apply for certification to offer daily and Sunday Mass. Parishes will also continue to celebrate Baptisms, Weddings, Funerals and Adoration. Given the more complex nature of celebrations of the Mass, entering Phase II will require parishes to:

- Expand the number of parish team members if civil authorities permit an increase in the crowd size for Phase II.
- Maintain an on-going procurement program for safety and cleaning supplies.
- Continue recruitment and training of new, non-vulnerable volunteers as needed.
- Develop logistical procedures in accord with the guidelines of the Plan to manage more frequent and larger services that cover actions before, during and after the rites.
- Implement a safe and secure attendance reservation/ ticketing system to maintain order and facilitate possible contact tracing of infection.
- Submit a detailed proposal for implementing Phase II.

Archdiocesan Actions and Responsibilities

To support the parishes in the preparation and implementation of Phase II, the Archdiocese or diocese will:

- Establish and update requirements for all services and rites according to the standards of government officials, health care experts and church authorities.
- Review and certify all parish proposals for reopening with celebration of Mass.
- Provide additional required webinars and training, as needed.
- Create and distribute to parishes a video message from the local bishop to explain procedures for attendance at Mass in Phase II.
- Conduct random assessments over time to ensure continued compliance with published requirements.

- Gather feedback from parishioners across the Archdiocese or diocese on how well the safety protocols are working and how comfortable they are with church precautions for their safety.
- Continually monitor feedback on execution and resources to assist in problem solving through ongoing communication with parish leadership, state and local authorities and public health officials.