



May 08 (revised May 13), 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Working within guidelines set forth by the Indiana Governor's office and the Center for Disease Control (CDC), we are gradually reopening the public celebration of the Mass on a limited basis. I write today to give you some details and prepare you for our next steps.

We all long to be together at Mass to receive our Lord in the Eucharist. However, **we need to get this right, not rushed**. For this next phase, there will be very limited attendance, social distancing, and other gathering precautions. We will all need to be patient and understanding as we adjust to these safety parameters, and for your part in that, I thank you. Charitable love requires that we remain committed to the protection of vulnerable persons and the whole community.

When may public Masses resume? Each parish is unique and needs time to plan to ensure that they are complying with various safety guidelines. Monday, May 11, was the first day parishes could begin opening Masses to the public, with a very limited number of participants. While this is now available, parishes should not reopen until they are ready.

Who will be among the first to participate in these Masses during May? We have some special groups of participants who will likely be among the first to return to the limited capacity Masses. First will be those adults who were to be baptized or received into the church at the Easter Vigil. Parishes also need to give priority to first communicants and their families. We also have families awaiting Memorial Masses since they were not able to have funeral Masses when their loved one died. Each parish will need to make decisions in the context of their local situation.

Why are we limiting the number of people who may attend Masses? The required social distancing means churches have a **very limited seating capacity** for each Mass. Parishes need to measure their pew space according to the required six feet social distancing parameter. For example, one of our larger parishes has a **normal capacity of 1200 people**. However, with the current social distancing measurements, that **capacity is reduced to 164**. To avoid turning people away at the door, I am asking parish leaders to be specific in letting parishioners know in advance how they will manage these limitations.

Each parish will adopt some system to manage this in the context of their local situation, which could involve reservations, invitations, and possibly tickets or attendance lists. At least through the month of May, this means that even if a Mass time is posted, please, **do not show up at a Mass unless you are previously assured by the parish that there is room for you at that specific Mass**.

It may feel very strange to adopt to these current limitations. We would all love to have full, packed pews. Out of charity, at least for this month, we will have to accept these limitations as we gradually resume public Masses. Please contact your parish and be patient and understanding as our parish leaders organize this process.

Are we still dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass? Yes. **Until August 15**, all members of the faithful in the Diocese of Gary continue to be **dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass** (while we must still keep holy the Lord's Day). All are encouraged to participate in one of the many livestreamed Sunday Masses.

As always, if you are sick, you should refrain from coming to Mass for your own health and that of others. Please also stay apprised of current public health guidelines. In Indiana, until **at least May 24**, the latest public guidelines state that those who are vulnerable or at-risk with underlying medical conditions or over 65 years of age should continue to shelter at home.

What will be different when we come to Mass? Social distancing means we will be sitting apart from each other. Members of the same household may sit together, but apart from others. Members of the congregation, out of concern for the health of all, will **wear face masks**, except when receiving communion.

Some things will likely be missing:

- fewer entryways open
- holy water removed from the stoups or baptismal fonts
- hymnals and missalettes removed from the pews (though you may bring your own)
- no passing of the collection basket (give online or leave your donations at designated location in the church)
- no offertory procession
- **no physical contact** during the sign of peace (or holding hands at the Our Father)
- no distribution of the Precious Blood
- no social gatherings after Mass

What will remain the same, or better, who will remain the same? *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”* (Heb 13:11) As the world seems turned upside down, Jesus is still with us. As our public celebration of the Mass has limitations, there is no limit on the love of Jesus and the power of the Eucharist. As the body of Christ may be separated physically, we remain spiritually united in Jesus.

On a more personal note, I certainly miss being physically present with all of you, my flock. You welcomed me so lovingly on February 11 and I launched a time of extensive welcome events throughout the diocese. A month later, things changed suddenly. What has not changed is that so many of you have continued to reach out and offer your support and prayers. Thank you for that support and know of my love and prayers for you and our community.

Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us.
Jesus, I trust in you...

Your Servant,

The Most Reverend Robert J. McClory
Bishop of Gary