

## Pandemic Update

Now we follow the journey of Lent but for many of us, the entire last year has seemed penitential as we dealt with the COVID-19 Pandemic. As the numbers from the health officials seem to steadily improve, it has started to sound like a ride with small children: “Are we there yet?” and “When will we get there?” or “This is taking foreverrrrrrrr!”

Yes, we are all anxious for return to activity in our daily lives and the practice of our faith that is not so encumbered by restrictions to prevent spread of infection. The statistics on the disease prevalence in both New Mexico and Arizona are wonderfully improved relative to the peak in December 2020. The reasons for this decline are multifactorial. The vaccinations, weather, and the increasing number of resistant persons post infection all play a role plus the characteristics of the disease itself may contribute in ways we do not understand. However, all the things that we have been doing to limit spread of the disease must be given some credit like the physical distancing, masks, extra cleaning of facilities and avoiding large assemblies. That said, a premature cessation of such healthy practices could produce a very undesirable change in the trends we currently enjoy. The disease is still present in many of our communities and there remains a sizable pool of susceptible persons.

The health officials will advise a gradual return to activities. Some of the last behaviors that will return to the list of prudent interactions will be those activities that were first noticed to fuel the spread of the disease: sitting close together in large groups, singing or shouting together and touching one another. The unpleasant fact remains that we may not be able to return to the previous level of concern (or lack of) about spreading disease in public and the workplace for a long time. The coronavirus variants may become persistent like colds and influenza. Even if we are obliged to live with the disease endemic among us, we still do not want to pass such a potentially serious thing to our friends, family, or coworkers if avoidable. Going to work or school with a fever and cough was never a good idea but we may no longer have the luxury of such risky behavior ever again. This disease has demonstrated how vulnerable humans have become to a new microbial disease. This is due to many factors that will not change to include an increased world population, urbanization, and the frequent interactions of people from many nations due to available transportation and world-wide commerce. With certainty we can say this will not be the last pandemic and they may become more frequent.

So, where are we now from the perspective of church activity. Bishop Wall recently gave specific guidance to the clergy for the celebration of the events of Holy Week. We will do those activities with continued cautions of physical distancing and face coverings per the guidance of local health officials. Some modification of the rites have been instructed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to decrease interpersonal contact or exposure.

One positive note is the lifting of the mandatory quarantine of persons coming into New Mexico. Officials still recommend avoiding public activity when coming from outside the State, especially if one has had any potential exposure to the disease. The matter is left to the discretion of the individual. With caution, we can now have diocesan events with less travel restriction.

New Mexico health authorities have begun to relax the limits on public activity through its “Red to Green” program. This links risk-stratified activities (like dining-in restaurants, gyms, hair parlors, theaters, etc.) to the disease prevalence as measured in each county. Where less disease is present, more of the risky activities can be allowed. An individual county can progress or regress. We currently see progress in several New Mexico counties within the Diocese of Gallup. The requirements for physical distancing and face covers remains in all categories. The

only significant difference for New Mexico churches is the total number of persons allowed to gather at one time. In many cases, the distance requirement dictates that number. The specific regulations by category go by percentage of fire code occupancy: red = 25%, yellow = 33%, green = 50%, and turquoise = 75%.

Arizona policies are much simpler. The physical distancing of 6 feet is universally advised. Facial coverings are advised. Vulnerable persons are advised not to go out in public where exposure is increased.

Many of our Native tribal lands remain very restricted in public activity due to the severe experience they incurred. We will follow the guidance of their leadership and pray for the protection of all the vulnerable persons within our diocese.

**New Guidance:** His Excellency, Bishop Wall, determined that some relaxation of prior policies was appropriate now. The clergy are charged to make certain that lay persons with expanded activity receive training to conduct their ministry safely. When and where needed, at the judgement of the priest, the following practices will be permitted:

- 1) Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC) may assist in the distribution of Holy Communion at Mass. The prior published procedures should be consulted for performing this activity safely in the same manner as instructed for the clergy. (This includes proper hand cleansing before and after. Note that gloves are **not** part of that protocol.) Unvaccinated persons who are at high risk if infected by the coronavirus due to medical reasons or age should not do this ministry now. Masks are advised and must be used if required by the state or local officials.
- 2) EMHC may take Holy Communion to the home-bound when it is requested. In a home with no known current disease problems, the same protective procedures should be followed as advised for communion at Mass. Visits should be brief. Physical distancing should be practiced to the extent feasible. Mask wear is advised. Visits to homes with known potentially contagious disease are restricted to the clergy following published protocol for such situations.
- 3) Altar servers may return to their ministry but limited to the number and activity that facilitates the efficient function of the clergy and the environment for worship. Physical distancing should be exercised as possible and masks are advised as per guidance above (1).
- 4) Lectors may be used. Please follow the proper protocol of hand washing, physical distancing and mask wearing when not reading.

**Conclusion:** The previous diocesan directives remain in effect except for the directions issued for Holy Week and the items above. The number of persons allowed in the assembly is determined by the physical distancing and local health authority policies for the total number in the gathering. The mandatory quarantine for travel into New Mexico is relaxed. These diocesan directives remain in effect indefinitely; but, if the good trends in the disease continue, we anticipate changes after Easter and guidance for “recovery.” Any changes will be promptly published on the Diocesan Webpage and the various social media platforms. Parishes are encouraged to post current directives as well.

May God bless all of you for your efforts to protect and sustain one another during this time of disease. The continued cooperation and prayers by everyone are greatly appreciated. Thank you.

*...and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus...* Hebrews 12:1-2

St. Joseph, pray for us.

Sincerely yours in Christ,  
Dcn Randolph Copeland  
Chancellor