



The Pastoral Center

St. Nicholas Church
Osgood, Ohio

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May 15, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

Peace be with you! As many of you are aware, the resumption of public worship will begin the week of Monday, May 25, 2020 throughout the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, however, **there will be necessary limitations.** In fact, parishes throughout the archdiocese will be nowhere close to returning to the norm in this regard.

On May 08, 2020, the Catholic Bishops of Ohio published a letter to the Christian faithful indicating that each diocesan bishop would determine a “soft opening” date for the public celebration of worship in their respective (arch)diocese, i.e. provided that such a celebration could be achieved safely by respecting social distancing requirements and observing other protocols that would help ensure the safety and the well-being of the Christian faithful.

Among such protocols established to ensure safety is the marker that this gradual return involves limiting each celebration to a “less than 50 percent occupancy of the Church building.” Since reducing the congregation size by about 50 percent to that which we are normally accustomed, and taking into consideration other safety and health precautions, Archbishop Schnurr issued a letter to the Christian faithful of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati on May 08, 2020, in order to further address the matter of a significant reduction in the number of people who will be able to attend a particular Mass.

In his letter, Archbishop Schnurr indicated that **the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass will remain in place for the foreseeable future** due to the extraordinary nature of our current circumstances. In short, it is not a mortal sin to not attend Sunday Mass while this dispensation remains in effect. The guidelines set forth by the Archdiocese also mandate that appropriate social distancing and the regulations put forth by public health authorities must be observed in all circumstances.

Considering such a limitation regarding Mass attendance, as well as the dispensation from the obligation to attend and to participate at the Sunday Mass, some folks might even wonder why the Church is preparing for a “soft opening.” Why not wait for the time that we can return to the norm? Well, the answer is quite simple. It is indisputable that so many members of the Christian faithful have an intense desire to participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass ... to be mystically present at the foot of the Cross ... to be mystically present at the Crucifixion on Mount Calvary ... to sacramentally receive the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ in Holy Communion! And, in an attempt to fulfill this beautiful and insatiable desire of the Christian faithful, Archbishop Schnurr has granted his permission for Pastors to resume the public celebration of the Mass ... **again, with necessary limitations.**

In his letter, Archbishop Schnurr recognized that all members of the Christian faithful, who wish to participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, will not necessarily be able to do so during a Sunday celebration. To that end, he reaffirmed the Christian faithful of the Archdiocese of Cincinnati that *“those who wish to participate in Mass and receive Holy communion can do so by attending any Mass that is celebrated any day of the week” [emphasis added]*. So, what does all of this mean for us and for our cluster? To put it simply, folks are being asked to consider attending a weekday Mass if possible, instead of a Sunday Mass as we move forward, and for the time being. Again, both parishes will have only a 50 percent seating capacity at any given weekday or weekend Mass.

Indeed, trying to figure all of this out has been a daunting and a stressful task! On Wednesday, May 13th, I convened a joint meeting of members of the Parish Pastoral Council (PPC) from both parishes, and of our cluster staff, so that we could all work together to develop a plan of implementation for the benefit of our cluster family. It was a very good meeting, and I was very happy with how everyone worked together, listened attentively to each other, and came up with some sensible and creative strategies to help us strive for success.

At that meeting, I also mentioned how we are blessed to have so many young families, farmers, students, and professionals in our beloved parishes who desire to participate at Mass during the week. At the same time, however, many of these folks are unable to participate at a weekday Mass due to our 8:00 a.m. Mass time on Tuesday through Friday. Moreover, some of these folks have had to go to other cluster parishes to be spiritually fed at an evening weekday Mass. As a result, it had been my hope for some time to do something that would meet the spiritual needs of this demographic of our cluster family, so that they could be spiritually fed at home rather than having to go elsewhere. To that end, I had a conversation with both Parish Pastoral Councils regarding whether it would make sense to change the Mass time on Thursday from 8:00 a.m. to 6:15 p.m., in order to accommodate members of our cluster family who are unable to attend our 8:00 a.m. weekday Masses. Both PPCs were supportive of this idea. It was further noted that it is not only important for us to be able to accommodate such a spiritual need for so many of our folks, but it is even more important at this time because our Church building capacity will be reduced by 50 percent. **So, effective the week of May 25th, 2020 our Mass schedule will return to normal, with the exception of the new Mass time on Thursday at 6:15 p.m. The celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation will still follow at the usual time at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday evening.**

When we return to the public celebration of the Mass, what will it even look like? At our joint PPC meeting we discussed how to observe the safety and health protocols in a reasonable, responsible, and sensible way. At the same time, we acknowledged that we are going to need the assistance and the cooperation of everyone in our beloved parishes in order to be successful. Among some of the temporary changes that you will notice are:

- (1) The hymnal books have been removed from the pews. Currently, our Music Directors, musicians, cantors, and choir members are working together to develop a plan to provide us with sacred music at Mass in a responsible and safe manner. Without the hymnal books, however, there will be a necessary reduction in congregational singing;

- (2) Holy water fonts and baptismal fonts will continue to be empty, as per the archdiocesan guidelines;
- (3) The Sign of Peace, which is an optional part of the Mass, will be temporarily suspended;
- (4) The Christian faithful, as well as Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, are encouraged, but not required, to wear face masks;
- (5) The presence of altar servers for weekday and weekend Masses will be temporarily suspended;
- (6) The reception of Holy Communion on the tongue is strongly discouraged, per the archdiocesan guidelines, although it is not prohibited. And, the pattern for the distribution of Holy Communion might be altered in such a way to help promote social distancing. At the time of this writing, specifics are still being developed; and,
- (7) Collection baskets will not be passed from hand to hand. At our joint PPC meeting, it was decided that collection baskets will be strategically placed in the church building at each Mass (hopefully including weekday Masses) for contributions, and they will be monitored by the ushers. At the time of this writing, specifics are still being developed, and they will likely be announced at each Mass. **Please remember that, even during these difficult, challenging, and uncertain times, your gifts of financial participation are very important in helping us to sustain the operations of our beloved parishes.** And, so, each and every gift is important to us, and we are grateful to those who have been able to continue to offer their financial support over the past weeks. Also, please remember that contributions can be mailed to, or dropped off, at the Parish Pastoral Center or at Osgood State Bank. Some folks are utilizing their online banking to contribute to the Church, which is also an option.

In order to help us maintain the 50 percent occupancy parameters, it was also discussed and decided at our joint PPC meeting that we would “rope off” every other pew in both Church buildings, which will help us to maintain appropriate social distancing measures, and we are kindly requesting that folks please respect this measure. **Simply put, if a pew is roped off, please do not remove the rope and sit in that pew.**

Again, I am grateful for the hard work of so many leaders in our beloved parishes and cluster who are working well together to prepare for the week of May 25th. At the end of the day, however, our overall success is going to greatly depend on the cooperation and the collaboration of everyone in our cluster family. Admittedly, some of these measures will be “trial and error”, and we will likely need to make some adjustments here and there. However, working together, we can make this happen!

Please be sure to be safe, stay healthy, and observe proper social distancing measures as much as possible, especially when entering and exiting the Church buildings. Also, I, along with members of both PPCs, would like to encourage everyone to evaluate which of the seven Masses celebrated in our cluster each week might make the most sense to attend in light of our reduced capacity, especially since it will be impossible to accommodate everyone at a weekend Mass.

Please also allow me to thank you in advance for your patience, for your understanding, and for your assistance during these challenging, difficult, and uncertain times. We are all doing the best that we can in these circumstances, and we are all in this together!

I started out our joint PPC meeting by acknowledging the many different feelings and emotions that all of us have been, and continue to, experience. Whether such feelings and emotions are grounded in a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, the response of the civil government at various levels, the response of the Church, etc., we have experienced them together ... feelings of confusion, fear, anxiety, anger, resentment, uncertainty, and so forth. And, while such feelings and emotions are a part of our human condition and must be freely and honestly acknowledged, it is also important that we do not allow them to consume us ... to serve as an obstacle from working together in our efforts to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of each other ... to prevent us from carrying out our mission as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although, we are not returning to normal right now, we are indeed blessed in so many ways, and I challenge each of us to always remember to look at our situation through the lens of the many blessings that we have received, and that we will continue to receive!

In the meantime, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

Fr. Howard