

# Update on Diocesan Directives for Health and Safety During the Coronavirus Pandemic

A Message from Bishop Mark – August 6, 2020

By now you have heard about a person who tested positive for the Coronavirus and attended Mass last weekend at Saint Francis of Assisi Parish, Johnstown. Public notice was made with due regard for the teaching and discipline of the Church concerning the necessary balance between the fundamental right of a person's privacy and the common good of others (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2491-2492). That person did the right thing in notifying the Church so that others could be made aware and take any precautions.

This occurrence prompted me once again to think about what Christ and the Church teach us concerning life and our spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health. They are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. Each one of us must take care of our personal health and well-being. In doing that, we should take into account the needs and the common good of others (Catechism, n. 2288).

Awareness and care for ourselves and others has been in the forefront of messages like *#we are in this together*, that have been repeated over the last few months.

Our spiritual well-being is nurtured through prayer, the Word of God, and the sacraments. The Holy Eucharist which we celebrate at Mass, is central to our spiritual health. The Sunday celebration of the Holy Eucharist is the source and summit of the life of the Church. It is not an individual thing, even as each person receives the Body and Blood of Christ. The Holy Eucharist is all about the Church, the holy people of God being made into and renewed together as one.

When it comes to the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, we are in this together. And in order to be in it together with and for each other, we need to be mindful of more than our individual, personal needs or desires. We need to be in it together for the common good; the well-being of everyone.

I want to remind everyone in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown that all of the Directives for coming together for the celebration of Mass and the reception of the sacraments during this time of the Coronavirus pandemic remain in effect.

That means masks are not optional when you come to church. I know that in some parishes people are not wearing masks. No one likes wearing them. But we need to do it for our individual good and the good of others. Wearing masks applies to everyone, including the bishop; all priests and deacons; readers; altar servers; ushers, and all the people. I have heard health experts say that wearing a mask is the single most effective means of stopping the spread of the Coronavirus.

Using hand sanitizer is also a must. No one complained when I had to repeatedly sanitize my hands when I celebrated the Ordination of our new deacons or new priests for the Franciscans.

There are not to be any missalettes or hymnals in any churches. But I have heard that in some places the books are still there. They need to be put away immediately until further notice.

I love music and singing in church. The directives now in place are to have a cantor/song leader and no choirs. But there are places where choirs are still being used. That needs to stop.

There is to be proper physical distancing. For the most part people are seated according to the plan adopted in each church. However, there are churches where people are not keeping a distance when they come forward to receive Holy Communion.

And in some places the people are stopping in the back of church or in the vestibule to speak with one another and their pastor; and everyone has already removed their masks before they are outside and away from others. There should be no gathering in groups inside a church during this time.

I think you get the picture. But once again, I am urging you to complete the picture. There are gaps and people are telling me about them. They have every reason to be concerned. In making me aware of their concerns, they are always thinking about the common good.

Without our best, conscious effort, we could be facing closed churches again. Let's not go there, please! So if you need to refresh your memory, all of the Diocesan Directives for churches, sacraments, etc. are still available on the diocesan website.

I am proud of what has been accomplished thus far in parishes and schools in our diocese during this Coronavirus pandemic. Thank you for your efforts. I urge everyone to remind yourself each day that you have a part in this. We are in this together!