



25 February 2022

COVID-19 UPDATE (UPDATE #24)

The Government of Ontario recently announced the lifting of most of the restrictions put in place to fight the coronavirus and its variants. These changes are a hopeful sign for all of us. They have ramifications, though, for our churches, halls and offices. Our continued vigilance is required. We want to maintain an environment that is safe and welcoming for all. These changes will come into effect on Tuesday, 1 March 2022.

1. Churches

- a) Physical distancing and contact tracing are no longer required. Gone also is the need for individual screening of people as they come to our churches. The onus is on the individual to self-screen. To this end, signs with questions for self-screening must be posted at each entranceway.
- b) Holy water fonts may be used.
- c) Hand sanitizer should be available at entrances for those who wish to use it.
- d) It is strongly encouraged that all parishes continue having ushers/greeters take people to their seats in the church. This practice will not only continue to promote a culture of welcome but would prevent crowding in any one area of the church or in any pew. While not having to observe physical distancing, such assistance with seating will help to spread people throughout the church.
- e) There should be a tone of celebration when welcoming people back to our fully-opened churches. It is a time for expressing gratitude for the work of all volunteers and staff who made possible the openings under pandemic restrictions. An appropriate celebration of thanksgiving can be planned for a later date.

2. The Celebration of the Mass

- a) Masks must be worn by all while in the church. As before, masks may be removed by priests, deacons and lectors when proclaiming the word of God, preaching or leading prayers. All of the functions must be done at a 3-metre (10-foot) distance from the congregation.
- b) Choirs may once again be formed, though all members must be masked while rehearsing and singing at Mass, just as the congregants must wear masks while singing. As before, cantors may remove their masks while leading the singing, provided they are at a 3-metre (10-foot) distance from the congregation and any other member of the choir.
- c) Processions with servers, lectors, deacons and presider may be restored at the beginning and end of the Mass, as well as for the presentation of gifts. Servers may once again assist at Mass, wearing masks at all times throughout the Mass with the exception of receiving Holy Communion.

- d) Collection baskets at the entrances to the church are to be maintained, thus avoiding unnecessary contact by touch.
- e) The Omicron and other variants continue to spread through aerosol transmission, hence the need to continue to wear masks. It is prudent, then, that ciboria with altar breads continue to be covered or placed at a distance from the presider during the Preparation of the Gifts, the Eucharistic Prayer and the Communion Rite.
- f) The Sign of Peace is still given without touch, with the exception of those within the same household.
- g) Communion processions are restored, with people wearing their masks as they approach the minister of Holy Communion. Congregants should be advised at the start of Mass that, with this change, they should maintain some comfortable distance at all times from those ahead of them in the Communion procession, and when entering and exiting the church. One metre (one yard), for example, is a prudent distance that will help people feel safe. A reminder may need to be given for a few weeks in March.

At the time of Communion, communicants should be directed to come up the aisle, as they did in pre-COVID times with appropriate distance. The usual dialogue will take place between the minister and the communicant. The communicant will receive the Host, step aside, remove his/her mask from one side, place the Host in her/his mouth, replace the mask, then return to his/her place in the pew. There will still be need for space and time after a communicant receives the Host before returning to the pew.

- h) Communion in the hand is strongly encouraged at this time. If Communion were to be received on the tongue, there would be concern of transmission of the virus through saliva or breath on the fingers of the minister of Communion. The minister of Communion would be vulnerable in this situation. Those who wish, however, may receive Communion on the tongue.

Parishes will have to organize those communicants who wish to receive on the tongue in such way that they would form a procession in a line separate from other communicants, or that they would come at the end of the procession to receive after other communicants. Ministers of Communion must sanitize their hands after giving Communion to each and every person who receives on the tongue. There can be no exceptions to these requirements.

Communion from the Cup is still not allowed.

- i) The possibility of having “children’s church” or “children’s liturgy” is still under discussion. At this point, therefore, these must not yet take place.
- j) Those parishes which have adopted the practice of live-streaming or recording Masses are encouraged to continue. There is great expectation that many parishioners will not yet feel that it is safe to return, and this form of connecting with their parish has been satisfying and helpful to them during the pandemic. While not the ideal for Eucharistic participation, it provides some level of comfort and contact for them. The dispensation from the Sunday obligation, lately extended to Pentecost Sunday, will continue to be reviewed and extended as deemed necessary.
- k) The directives given in Update #23 for Lent and Holy Week remain in effect, with recognition of the items above and that we follow the “Fewer” restrictions.

3. Halls and Offices

- a) There are no capacity restrictions for parish halls or offices.
- b) The onus is on individuals to self-screen for any symptoms of the virus before entering. To this end, signs with questions for self-screening must be posted at each entranceway.
- c) Hand sanitizer should be available at entrances for those who wish to use it.
- d) Masks must be worn in halls but may be removed when people are seated. Masks are worn in public spaces within offices, including hallways, lunchrooms and photocopy rooms. Masks may be removed in individuals' offices or workspaces.
- e) Seating arrangements for events in the hall should be discussed with an event organizer to determine the most appropriate seating arrangement that will be comfortable for participants.
- f) Plated, family style, buffet and take-out food service is permitted in halls.
- g) Parishes are encouraged to retain any plexiglass or glass shields which have been installed, especially in entrances and reception desks. These may be needed if other variants of COVID-19 arise, but also will offer further safety for employees and visitors alike.
- h) All are expected to begin the return to the workplace. Any absence, including working from home, must be approved by the employee's supervisor.

4. Some Concluding Notes

- a) Access to hospitals and long-term care homes is based on their policies for resident safety and vaccinations.
- b) It is quite likely that new variants may develop and quickly spread, as seen with the Delta and Omicron variants. We must be prepared that another variant will force us to adopt tighter restrictions again. While such a development would seem like a huge setback, vigilance and readiness to react will help us to prevent, as best we can, a worse situation from happening in the future. Let us continue to pray that God will deliver us from it all but, at the same time, let us beware the signs of danger should they return.
- c) The diocesan policy on vaccinations against COVID-19 is being reviewed in light of the changes in governmental restrictions. We are monitoring what other institutions and places of business are doing. Further word will come in due time.

We have all worked very hard to get to this point, and I express my deep gratitude for the sacrifices you have made.

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