



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

Preparation for the Reopening of Public Mass

May 12, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Coronavirus has affected society and the Church in ways unlike anything we have experienced in our lifetimes. None of us could have imagined the impact on our families, our livelihoods, and our practice of the Faith. As treatments for the sick and potential vaccines are developed, it is important that we act prudently for everyone's wellbeing, body and soul.

What has the Church been doing?

Hospital chaplains have heroically ministered to the sick throughout this crisis and parish food pantries continue to support those most in need. Your priests have adapted as best they can to the limits of "distance ministry" while struggling to manage the devastating impact on our parishes and schools. Catholic school teachers, administrators and Faith Formation volunteers are admirably upholding standards of excellence while keeping our children engaged online. Catholic Charities is addressing the physical and emotional needs of people around the clock.

We know that there is a hunger to return to public Mass and the celebration of the Sacraments. Pray that this hunger spreads among active and inactive Catholics, so that our Churches may soon be filled and experience a lasting renewal when we reemerge.

The challenges facing us:

Much is still unknown about the virus and how best to deal with it. As a result, many decisions are actually judgment-calls based on a review of the information available. What is known is that the virus is deadly, particularly for the elderly and vulnerable. As of this writing, nearly 75,000 have contracted the virus and over 3,500 souls have returned to God, just within the territory of our Diocese. May our Heavenly Father welcome them and comfort their families. Our hospital systems, front-line doctors, nurses and support staffs were very nearly overrun.

All of this leaves us with an enormous challenge: **when and how to reestablish public liturgies in a way that does not irresponsibly place the common good and the health of our people in grave danger.** These are serious moral issues. If we can protect the sanctity of human life and the stability of our healthcare system by cooperating with sensible limitations and safety practices, then we have a moral obligation to do so. This is not a surrendering of our right to practice our Faith. It is an exercise of our moral responsibility for the common good. Therefore, we are carefully forming our plan for the reopening of public Mass in consultation with medical experts and civil authorities who share in our responsibility for the common good.

The Holy Mass

The Holy Mass is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our Salvation (Catechism of the Catholic Church – Article 3, Paragraphs 1322 – 1419). The Mass unites us to the sacrifice of Christ, the gift of himself to the Father for us. Spiritual Communion, which has been a continual part of the Church's theology through

Saints Augustine, Aquinas, John Vianney, John Paul II and others, has allowed us to remain united to the Lord's Body and Blood, offered daily by our priests, even when we are not physically present or do not physically receive Holy Communion.

Considerations for Reopening

The conditions on Long Island are being carefully monitored and preparations are being made. **However, we do not yet have a date for reopening public Masses.** Medical experts and civil authorities have urgently asked that congregate gatherings of any size remain suspended until we better understand the risks and how they are managed.

When it is determined that we can gather for Mass with reasonable safety, it will likely involve precautions that will require everyone to make sacrifices. However, the Mass is not our "personal possession". It is a gift from God entrusted to the Church. Therefore, the dignity of the Mass and the Church's liturgical laws must be respected and observed. Certain elements of the Mass can be adapted while others cannot because we do not have the authority to alter them.

Limitations may involve facial coverings or masks, limits on seating capacity to maintain social distancing, changes to the Mass schedule to allow for cleaning, modified procedures for the distribution of Holy Communion, etc. This will involve tremendous coordination between clergy, parish staffs and volunteers, as well as training and preparation. Guidelines and protocols are being developed that will be shared with pastors. The dispensation from the obligation to physically attend Mass will likely remain in place for a time, especially to protect the elderly and most vulnerable among us.

Other Sacraments

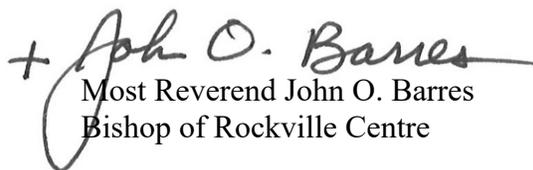
The period of isolation has delayed celebrations of Baptisms, First Communions, Confirmations and Weddings. Funeral Masses for loved ones have also been postponed. We understand the sorrow and sacrifice of those awaiting the celebration of Holy Sacraments. Please understand the enormous stress that this will place upon your very limited number of priests, some of whom are older and particularly vulnerable because of health concerns. We ask for your patience, understanding and compassion as your clergy serves you as best we can through these complex and very challenging times.

Our Prayers and our Gratitude

Dear friends, thank you for your prayers and support throughout this crisis. Your parish Church depends on weekly contributions in order to survive and carry on Christ's saving mission. The loss of Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday collections is a serious hardship for the functioning of a parish. Likewise, Catholic Charities, our Catholic Schools, and the Catholic Ministries Appeal all rely on support from the Faithful to carry out their missions. We are so grateful for your dedication, especially during these most challenging times. Please know that you are remembered in my prayers and daily Masses.

The risen Christ has won the victory over death. His grace will strengthen us to carry this cross so as to share in his resurrection.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ John O. Barres
Most Reverend John O. Barres
Bishop of Rockville Centre