

What to expect as we transition in Virginia's three-phase reopening



Whenever the current restrictions are eased and we are able to gather for Mass again, it is important for all of us to understand that things will not immediately “go back to normal.”

On Friday, April 24, 2020, the Governor of Virginia, in consultation with health experts, announced the development of a three-phase guideline with the

goal of easing restrictions in the next weeks and months ahead. Concurrently, the Diocesan staff has been planning for liturgical celebrations in the future, taking into consideration any new guidelines.

Based on the number of letters and emails we have received, we know the desire to participate in the liturgy and receive the Eucharist is incredibly strong. We are exploring ways to address this concern, while continuing our care and concern for the physical and spiritual health of all, an expression of divine law. The greatest divine law is that we love God and our neighbor; all other laws and individual rights are subordinate to that supreme divine law. We ask everyone to please continue to be patient and charitable as we work through these difficult times.

While we are still working on the details, the list below are some things we all need to keep in mind:

- **Social distancing will likely still be in place.** The six feet separation restriction will likely still be required. You may be asked to wear a face covering, as recommended by the CDC. If you are in a vulnerable category (i.e., older adult, 65 years and older; person who is immunocompromised), you may continue to be encouraged to remain home. Anyone who is ill, or suspects he or she is ill, should refrain from participation in public activities, including Mass. In addition, in light of CDC monitoring recommendations, anyone who arrives at the church and is exhibiting symptoms may be asked not to attend Mass out of an abundance of care and caution for others. Parishes may have procedures for receiving communion that maintains social distancing.

- **Attendance at Mass may continue to be limited.** It is expected that restrictions for any large gatherings will remain in place. However, we are working on how parishes might allow for access to communion outside of Mass. Parishes could determine the best way to do this on the local level, and it may be that parishioners sign-up for a time to come and receive communion or have an assigned day and/or time based on their last name.
- **Church spaces may be limited.** Only a certain number of pews or chairs may be available for use. Hymnals may be removed, and paper worship aids utilized.
- **Dispensation from the Sunday and holy day obligation would remain,** due to the limited number of faithful who might be able to attend Mass and gather, and too, recognizing that those in a vulnerable category should remain home. Parishes should continue livestreaming/recording Mass for the faithful.
- **Liturgical changes will likely remain in effect.** For those able to attend Mass, similar practices like those in March will likely remain in place, e.g., distribution of Holy Communion under one species, no exchanging of the sign of peace, no holy water fonts, etc.

Each parish will be asked to assemble a parish plan for reopening based on CDC recommendations that addresses the parish's local circumstances in each phase set forth by the Governor.

Even though parishes will take all reasonable precautions, and sanitize as best they can after each liturgical celebration, including the restrooms, there will still exist the risk of infection for anyone who attends a public Mass as we move through the various phases of easing restrictions. No one should expect that they will be safer in church than in any other public space.

Please keep in mind, we will all experience challenges and frustration as we navigate through these weeks and months ahead. Each parish, based on their local circumstances, may implement guidance from the Diocese in different ways.

Let us continue to keep those sick and afflicted with the COVID-19; those on the front-lines (medical professionals) caring for the sick; those who have died as a result of the virus; and all of our fellow parishioners and parishes in our prayers in these days ahead.