

Catholic Diocese of Jackson
Update regarding Protocols during the Pandemic
3 September 2021

Introduction:

We last updated our COVID-19 pandemic protocols at the end of July. We continue to have increased cases here in Mississippi. At our priests council meeting on 2 September 2021, we discussed the protocols and heard reports from the different members of the council as to the reality of how these protocols were being implemented in their parishes. We continue to advise the pastors, lay ecclesial ministers, and parish leaders to decide with prudence and care the best way to implement our Diocesan policies and norms for the pandemic in the overall reality of the parish community. We continue to emphasize that when implementing these safety protocols, we should all be cognizant of avoiding unnecessary risks.

For Masses:

Parishes are faced with different realities and to size and makeup of parishioners and of the size and layout of their building facilities. We have decided it is still prudent to allow the local parishes to address their reality in making decisions how to address the pandemic through these protocols. These suggestions should be implemented based on the parish's reality and the local community reality and community regulations that are in place.

Social distancing of 3 feet is recommended.

Masks are encouraged for everyone, but especially for those who are vaccinated and who need to take precautions due to age or health condition and for those children, youth, and adults who are not vaccinated. The common good of the community is a priority.

Vulnerable individuals or the unvaccinated may find it safer to attend a daily Mass where there is less Mass attendance and more social distancing compared to a weekend Mass. Priests have reported that wearing masks can vary from parish to parish. In many parishes,

masks are worn by the majority of parishioners.

Parish leaders may decide that a certain area of church seating be reserved for those wearing masks, taking into consideration the physical layout of the church.

Youth and adults may serve as altar servers. Altar servers are encouraged to wear masks. When the prayers are read by the priest during Mass, a book stand should be used instead of an altar server.

The parish may decide to maintain the entrance procession and recessional procession down the main aisle taking safety into consideration.

We encourage the faithful to receive Holy Communion in the hand, since this is the safest way to do so during the pandemic. However, if for pastoral reasons the priest decides that he wants to offer Holy Communion on the tongue, he should offer it on the tongue at the end of the communion time, having families come together, and sanitizing after each family unit receives Holy Communion on the tongue. The priest should only give Holy Communion on the tongue if he feels that he can do so safely, protecting the priest and the community. The priest and the Eucharistic minister who distribute the Eucharist should wear a mask at that time. The Precious Blood should not be offered to communicants.

We encourage the parishes not to have the offertory collection through the passing of a basket in the pews. Instead, the parish should encourage on-line giving and could have a basket for the offertory in front of the altar and/or at the entrance of the church.

Hymnals and missalettes may be used in the pews.

Sanitizing the pews does not have to be as often as before, since the CDC states that the risk from contracting the virus from surfaces is minimal. The community should prudently decide on sanitizing procedures.

Hand sanitizer should be used by parishioners upon entrance to the church and should be provided by the parish. Priests should use hand sanitizer at different times during the Mass when they deem it to be appropriate.

Bulletins can be handed out to parishioners at Mass, but we also encourage you to email bulletins to parishioners using Flocknote.

We are discouraging the filling of the holy water font due to safety concerns.

For parishes who want to start back with choirs, adults in the choirs need to be vaccinated. Priests may decide just to have a cantor instead of a full choir.

For funerals, weddings, baptisms, and other sacraments, the norms and procedures followed for Mass should be followed.

Meetings and Gatherings:

For meetings, gatherings, parish groups and outside groups, the local community will make the decision as to what it can accommodate in its facilities.

Awareness of safety protocols needs to be followed when serving meals. Meals should still not be buffet style or self-serve.

Social distancing should be observed in meetings, a minimum of 3 feet.

The local community can decide if it is safe and prudent to allow non-parish outside groups to meet in the facilities at this time.

The local community will decide the sanitizing and cleaning procedures needed at parish facilities.

At gatherings and when seated at tables, the parish and those present can decide on the safety of taking off masks. We encourage the wearing of masks at these gatherings, especially for individuals

who have compromised immune systems, those not vaccinated, and those with other underlying health conditions are still encouraged to wear masks at such gatherings even when those vaccinated individuals are not wearing masks. The decision to wear or not wear a mask should be prudently made when considering the risks involved.

Youth Groups and Religious Education Classes

For youth groups and religious education classes, some parishes are requiring masks, especially when the local schools require them. We strongly encourage the use of masks for children and youth, whether they are vaccinated or not. The decision to wear masks should be made in the spirit of these overall protocols.

Some parishes are giving parents the option to send religious education materials home for family study, especially when the parents feel that coming to religious education classes is a risk they do not want to take.

For trips, the risk should be evaluated, knowing that day trips are far safer than overnight trips. A preference should be made for local trips and trips of three hours and less. We strongly discourage long-distance trips and overnight trips at this time. When planning a trip, safety while using transportation and a plan for dealing with sickness and quarantining if that situation arises needs to be addressed. Keeping everyone safe on any kind of trip and having a contingency plan should be priorities.

Service projects are feasible, as long as safety procedures and protocols are kept in mind.

Meals and snacks should not be self-serve or buffet style. Individually wrapped snacks and food items minimize risk. The parish should consider serving meals in a clamshell container for safety reasons.

When planning such activities for children and youth, keep in mind situations where we can let our guard down, which could create situations of greater risk.

Concluding thoughts

We want to thank all of you for your efforts in keeping our parishioners safe during the pandemic. We acknowledge that all of us are very weary of dealing with the pandemic. Especially with the Delta variant and with the increase in new cases and hospitalizations, we should not let our guard down, but rather to continue to be prudent and careful in all we do.

Parishes are encouraged to look at the above protocols and to adapt them and make decisions according to the local reality of the community of the parish. Demographics, local COVID cases, vaccination rates, and physicals layouts of parishes vary greatly.

We will continue to monitor the situation and will issue modified guidelines when the reality of the pandemic changes. Blessings to all of you during these challenging times.