Coronavirus Update
March 11, 2020

This document captures the most recent guidance from the Archdiocese of Seattle regarding the coronavirus and steps our communities can take to help prevent its spread. We will be updating this guidance in accordance with recommendations from the Washington State Department of Health and local public health officials.

We continue to track the progress of the coronavirus, which now, according to the World Health Organization, is a global pandemic. Local health officials predict significant spreading if we do not attempt to slow it down — especially in our region, which is the known entry point.

It is with this in mind that Archbishop Etienne announced there would be no public celebration of Mass across the Archdiocese of Seattle. Today’s directive was made for the common good and for the people of God entrusted in our care — many of whom are considered high risk and vulnerable. We must do our part to slow down this epidemic.

It is through this framework that pastors will approach decision-making about parish life. We do not want parish life to come to a screeching halt; however, it would be irresponsible of us to gather large groups of people. Instead, we encourage pastors to think about necessary activities and postpone non-essential gatherings — keeping in mind the common good.

In light of the archbishop’s directive, people should know that they are temporarily dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass until the coronavirus danger lessens and Masses are reinstated. This directive, however, does not close the church which will be open for private prayer. Please remember to follow all recommendations from Public Health officials to stay home if you’re sick, wash your hands frequently, and practice social distancing of six feet within the church.

During this time, pastors will be available for pastoral emergencies, private meetings, anointing of the sick, and so on. At the end of the day, we want to ensure we are slowing the spread of the coronavirus and protecting the vulnerable in our community, while also serving the needs of our parishioners.

In addition to the archbishop’s directive, today the superintendent for Catholic schools announced that Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Seattle will follow the school closure guidance from the local public school districts. Starting next week, Catholic schools in the boundaries of Seattle Public Schools will be closed through March 30, 2020. The Office for Catholic Schools continues to track this closely and predicts other districts may close in the next few weeks.
These two announcements significantly impact our community. People will spend more time at home now. Many parishes will begin to use video streaming to provide online Masses. This is also a time for Catholics to manifest Christ’s love more than ever. Here are some ideas to show this love:

- Expand outreach by making phone calls to homebound neighbors and local nursing home residents to accompany them in spirit.
- Offer to pray over the phone.
- Offer to go grocery shopping for others who need to stay at home.
- Our homeless neighbors will be encountering more hunger as local restaurants and catering companies begin to reduce the preparation of meals. Increase giving to local foodbanks, Catholic Community Services, and St. Vincent de Paul.
- Consider donating blood or plasma.
- Purchase gas cards for your local nursing home or hospital health care providers and drop them off at the front desk as a thank you gift from the local Catholic church.

**Baptism**

All parishes in the Archdiocese of Seattle are asked to observe some temporary practical norms concerning the Sacrament of Baptism until the coronavirus is contained. At this time, Baptisms are still possible based on pastoral urgency. However, in order to limit any potential spread of the virus to a vulnerable population, we recommend only small private family Baptisms. We recommend against any “immersion” baptisms. Instead, please use fresh water that has been blessed for the Baptism and immediately drain it after.

**Confession**

During Lent, we especially want to offer people the opportunity to experience the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Providing this sacrament is an important and essential way in which we minister the healing and merciful love of God. Even though we are in a heightened health alert state, the conditions do not yet exist for general absolution. Therefore, we will continue to offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation on an individual basis only.

To help minimize the risk of exposure, we recommend considering the following actions should anyone be concerned about possible transmission of the coronavirus:

- Temporarily move out of the confessional if it is in a tight space and provide the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a larger room where a confidential conversation can still be held.
- If possible, we recommend using a screen to block the air flow between the priest and penitent. The penitent should always have the option of confessing their sins anonymously.
- Ensure at least 6 feet of space between the priest and penitent.
- We advise using a chair without armrests or cleansing the armrests with a sanitizer between each person. You may also consider providing this sacrament in such a way that
the penitent remains standing so to ensure proper distance while minimizing the surfaces that are touched.

**Pastoral ministry for homebound, hospitalized or quarantined**

Jesus calls us to be as present as possible to people in these circumstances at this time lest they feel abandoned or isolated in a moment of need. They must know the love of God through us. Let us remember the very clear words of Jesus when he taught us the Corporal Works of Mercy:

> “I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you took care of me.
> I was in prison, and you visited me.” Matthew 25:26

Our faith requires us to continue the ministry of our Lord Jesus – including anointing of the sick – ensuring that all appropriate hospital protocols are followed. (Check with the nurse’s station before entering patient rooms if you have any questions). Additionally, we will continue to provide pastoral care to people who are homebound or quarantined. However, there are key items to consider:

- Any minister who does not wish to carry out this ministry – for whatever reason - may be excused by contacting their supervisor. The supervisor (OVC, Pastor, or parish leader) should ensure another person provides the pastoral care to hospitalized, homebound, or quarantined individuals. This ministry should not cease without notification of superiors and appropriate follow-through.

- It is particularly helpful for all homebound visitors to call ahead to ensure the individual is still accepting visitors. Pro-active communication will help confirm that individuals and families desire such visits.

- It is most important that all home-bound visitors practice the highest sanitary precautions, including excellent hand washing, when carrying out their ministry.

- If you are preparing to visit someone who is showing symptoms – or if you are called to anoint an individual who has the coronavirus in a homebound situation - you must follow these guidelines from Public Health King County to avoid quarantine:
  - You must wear a mask and gloves
  - You must wash hands and use proper gel protocols
  - You must not linger in the room (less than 15 minutes)
  - If possible, wear a gown to cover clothes
  - If you know you will anoint someone with the coronavirus, please reach out to Nick Schoen who can help coordinate the proper Anointing Kit for you. *(See details below.)*

- Any minister who has had *unprotected close contact* with someone who has the coronavirus *(by not following the guidelines above)* must self-quarantine for two weeks and follow the guidelines issued by the Washington State Department of Health:
Ministers may encounter situations where they are denied access to facilities – which is happening at various nursing facilities. In this situation, we recommend calling the individuals directly and sharing the following prayer with them:

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most holy Eucharist. I love you above all things, and I desire to receive you into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace you as if you were already there and unite myself wholly to you. Never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.

Anointing Kits
This notice is for those priests who may be called on to offer the Anointing of the Sick to any homebound person manifesting possible symptoms of coronavirus. Please read carefully.

We have received good advice from Public Health at King County regarding steps to take for providing the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick to people who have Covid-19. However, we have a limited supply of the personal protection equipment they recommend. We are therefore going to select a few priests from each region who will be designated to provide this sacrament in a homebound situation. If you are interested, please contact Nick Schoen who will be providing the training on the proper use of the personal protection equipment that will be included in their “Anointing Kits.” As we get more equipment, we will expand this list of priests, however, we are limiting this to priests who are under age 60 at this time.

Please note, this specific anointing protocol only applies to homebound people who are showing signs of the coronavirus or have tested positive for it. Hospitals, nursing homes and adult family homes already have a clear and effective process in place so priests will not have to self-quarantine after anointing someone with the coronavirus in a hospital setting.

Priest, Deacon or Parish staff become ill
Anyone who feels sick should self-isolate and immediately call their health provider. Essential questions they should ask if they are worried about the coronavirus: Have they had close contact with a person known to have COVID-19? Do they have fever or harsh cough? Please contact Nick Schoen if people on your staff have been exposed and for support in finding backup coverage if needed.

Preparing the Worship Space of the Church
All parishes in the Archdiocese are asked to observe some heightened sanitization and hygiene standards at this time. We are grateful for all the parish staff, volunteers and others who helped prepare and sanitize our churches across the archdiocese. In addition to increased cleaning, we recommend taking the following actions to minimize the spread of viruses and germs:
• Parishioners should make every effort to observe the highest standards of hygiene. That means not touching your face, wiping your nose or cough while in church. If you do, please step out to wash your hands.
• Please remove items that are in common areas and are regularly touched.
• Please remove music books from the pews. These commonly-handled items can serve to inadvertently transmit viruses from one person to the next.
• Please remove paper in the pews (like Pew Art cards or comment cards).
• Should your parish need a deep-cleaning because of a potential exposure, please contact Ed Foster for next steps. We are working with experts to develop coronavirus cleaning procedures, which we will distribute when they are complete.

**Remember to Pray**
Catholics have always joined together in prayer during times of plague throughout the ages, ministered to the sick, attended to the dying and buried the dead. May we do the same today, loving God and our neighbor. In times like this, we have the opportunity to live out Jesus’s command to love God and our neighbor. Let’s continue to pray for everyone involved – especially as we continue our Lenten journey.

As Pope Francis reminds us, we should be reaching out to our communities and praying in solidarity with the Church around the world. He said,

“Let us pray to the Lord also for our priests, that they may have the courage to go out and go to the sick people to bring the strength of God’s word and the Eucharist and accompany the health workers and volunteers in this work that they are doing.”