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Distancing and sanitization: the way to restore public Masses

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Celebrating Mass is quite possible while safeguarding the health of the faithful. All that is needed is to respect some guidelines which, if followed, would allow for public liturgies to resume. Our contributing writer and epidemiologist, Paolo Gulisano, here offers some protocols based on his current knowledge of COVID-19 and principles which the Daily Compass has always supported since the onset of the health emergency. It is a very clear example just how possible it is to combine freedom of worship with legitimate health and safety precautions.



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PUBLIC LITURGY SAFETY PROTOCOLS AND MEASURES**1. Introduction**

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, necessary measures must be taken to contain the risk of spreading infection.

Scientific evidence from various countries hit hard by the coronavirus informs us that the most effective measures of preventing infection are cleaning and disinfecting spaces as well as maintaining social distancing.

Churches are an environment with a very low risk of contagion. In many countries, both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches have continued their liturgical

celebrations in recent months. They have done so without causing outbreaks and increasing new cases of contagion. Indeed, some countries, such as Poland or Bulgaria, are among those with the lowest incidence of illness, hospitalization, and death.

In light of this epidemiological data, it is believed that liturgical functions can be resumed in the presence of the faithful both during the week and on Sundays provided that there are slight changes in the ways celebrations are conducted to protect the health of the faithful and priests.

There is an additional element to consider: churchgoers are not like commercial patrons: they enter sacred spaces with a sense of deep awareness and personal responsibility. If a believer is ill, or experiences suspicious symptoms, he knows it is his duty to stay home.

2. Safety measures

The following procedures are intended as operational guidelines to allow for the regular celebration of liturgies. The principal guidelines are social distancing and sanitizing environments.

Social distancing means respecting maximum quotas for entering churches. Thus, a necessary decrease in the number of faithful present in any church, in turn, will require an increase in the number of Masses to be celebrated on Sundays in parishes to satisfy the needs of faithful.

Masses should be celebrated in churches, not outdoors, to ensure that functions can take place in sanitized environments.

Church access should be unhindered for faithful by providing multiple entrances to prevent crowding while respecting capacity quotas. The social distancing measure between faithful should be set at one meter. Inside churches chairs must be arranged to respect this minimal distance. Spacing measures should also be respected in pews. For example, a four-person pew can accommodate two faithful seated at opposite ends. Families larger than two persons (e.g. parents with children), however, can be seated together in one pew.

Personal protective equipment: only gloves should be required which the faithful must wear upon entering the church. Scientific literature and epidemiological evidence attests that hands are the main means of contagion. The use of gloves makes disinfectant dispensers redundant. Disinfectant should, instead, be used by the celebrant prior to the start of any religious function.

Faithful do not need to wear masks. However, if some faithful want to wear one during Mass, due to any particular personal concerns, they should be permitted to do so.

Unlike what happens, for example, in business locales, no measurement of basal body temperature of faithful is needed. As already mentioned, all faithful will assess their own state of health before going to Mass.

During Mass the sign of peace should not be exchanged. Faithful can leave their seats during various moments of the liturgy (e.g. to lector, help with the offertory, or receive Communion) while always respecting a distance of one meter between persons. To receive Communion, the faithful will arrange themselves in a single file while keeping one meter apart.

In light of what has been outlined above, Communion should not be received in the hands, especially with gloves on, but directly in the mouth. The celebrant, who will have already disinfected his hands before Mass and who will have further washed his hands during the liturgical rite, will give Communion under the only species of Bread. Communion cannot be distributed by other individuals, such as by extraordinary ministers or other ordinary ministers, but only by the celebrant.

At the end of the Mass, all faithful should be invited to leave the church in an orderly fashion while respecting the social distancing guidelines and without congregating.

3. Sanitation measures

After Mass, cleaning and sanitization must be carried out immediately.

First, it is necessary to allow for an adequate ventilation inside the church, leaving all the doors open to provide the necessary flow of air.

The primary purpose of sanitizing environments is to reduce the risk of contagion through contact. Therefore, this is mainly done through surface sanitization. It is, thus, necessary to proceed cleaning any surface that had come into regular contact with faithful: floors, chairs, counters, pews, and door handles.

Cleaning of floors must be carried at least 1% chlorine-based sanitizing detergent and with alcohol-based disinfectants or with bleach on other surfaces.

Regarding church furnishings, antibacterial sprays may be used to sanitize them.

There is no scientific evidence that COVID-19 survives in water. Therefore, it is possible to use holy water fonts, which, in any case, may be emptied and sanitized with disinfectants once per week.

4. Information

Through diocesan websites and parish notices, the faithful will be informed of the rules described herein to regulate church access and Mass celebrations for health and safety. Printed copies of these rules may also be posted on signs and via leaflets placed at church entrances.

5. Other liturgical celebrations

The above protocols also apply to all other liturgical celebrations: funerals, baptisms, and weddings. The bride and groom at weddings are exempted from the one-meter distancing rule as well as the parents of children during baptismal rites.

Photographers may be permitted at such services provided they are wearing gloves and respect the prescribed social distance.

In compliance with these guidelines, it is also permissible to resume celebrating First Communion and Confirmations.

6. Sacrament of Reconciliation

Confessions may resume in all churches. A distance of one meter is required between penitents and confessors. Confessionals with mesh screens are particularly suitable. If they are not available, a small plexiglas scree may be installed instead. Following the penitential rite, which would be best to arrange at pre-scheduled times, all confessionals must be sanitized.

