

May 13, 2020. Bishop's Catholic Voice article.

People are asking me "Bishop, when are you going to reopen our churches for public Mass?"

I have received many beautiful and respectful emails and letters from our parishioners expressing great longing to go to Mass and receive Our Lord in Holy Communion. One lady approached me in the Cathedral, when we reopened the doors for private prayer following a livestreamed Sunday Mass. Wearing a mask, she went down on her knees and begged me to receive Holy Communion.

My answer: I will reopen the churches for Mass in our diocese when it is safe to do so.

I understand the deep and holy desire to come together to worship the Lord in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and to receive His Body and Blood in the Blessed Sacrament. But I do not want to put people at risk of sickness and even death by unnecessarily exposing them to the coronavirus.

In order to make my decision, I am following the advice of a devout Catholic who is a physician and Rear Admiral in the U.S. Public Health Service. I am also following the advice of the USCCB and the Thomistic Institute which has assembled a team of experts in medicine, science, public health, and the sacraments and liturgy - to give guidelines on how to safely administer Holy Communion and the sacraments with minimum risk. This does not mean we can go back to "business as usual" immediately. We are envisioning a phased approach: limiting attendance, observing social distancing in seating, wearing masks, cleaning pews after each Mass, carefully distributing Holy Communion so as not to touch the communicant, etc. We are also looking at holding Mass outdoors, as they did during the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918.

When it comes to the political situation, the Catholic bishops of California are working with the Governor's Office in Sacramento. When we last wrote Governor Newsom we advised him it would be very painful for the religious communities of California to witness a recovery process in which large retail stores and office buildings are open in the coming months, yet public worship would still be prohibited, as some recommend. As bishops, we believe this would be unjust and counterproductive to rebuilding California.

On the city and county scene, I am working with an ecumenical coalition of 37 pastors of protestant churches in Oakland to dialogue with the Mayor and Alameda County Board of Supervisors.

In the meantime, we continue to live stream Sunday and daily Masses. Some pastors are administering Holy Communion outside of Mass, following strict safety guidelines. I participated in a parking lot Sunday service, with Exposition, Liturgy of the Word, homily, and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, at Santa Maria parish in Orinda. We had about 90 cars in the lot, and the parishioners were very appreciative. Another pastor has commenced First Holy Communion inviting three children and their parents to attend Mass every weekday evening, social distanced, etc. It will take him about six weeks to get through the whole class. I performed an Ordination to the Diaconate for the Capuchin Franciscan Friars last weekend - with only 10 in attendance, and livestreamed. There are creative things we can do to safely worship God and practice our Faith, until we can fully reopen.

In the meantime, we have postponed our diocesan Ordinations to the Priesthood originally scheduled for May 29 to Saturday, September 5, 2020 at 10 a.m. at the Cathedral. We are postponing the Diocesan Eucharistic Congress from this summer until the Feast of Corpus Christi, June 6, 2021. As of now, we still planning on ordaining our transitional deacons on Saturday August 8 -- but still remains unclear as to how many we can invite to attend.

Just as going to Safeway is essential for the health of our bodies, so going to Mass and Communion is essential for the health of our souls. Health care workers in particular are writing me saying they need to receive Holy Communion to receive the spiritual strength to perform their essential work of saving lives. The charitable work of the Church continues in our St. Vincent de Paul soup kitchens, food pantries, Catholic Charities social work, and Catholic Worker outreach to the homeless. I am pressing for the day when we can safely reopen our churches to engage in divine worship -- so we can love God with the same fervor as we are currently loving our neighbor.