



Office of the Bishop
Diocese of Saint Cloud

214 3RD AVENUE SOUTH - BOX 1248
ST. CLOUD, MINNESOTA 56302
TELEPHONE (320) 251-2340
FAX (320) 258-7618

January 22, 2021

Dear Pastor,

While we face many ongoing challenges related to COVID-19, the situation in Minnesota and our diocese continues to improve. In light of this, I am adjusting some of our protocols and updating others with regard to parish activities. I also have additional information/resources to share with you. Please read the following carefully:

• **In-person gatherings and social activities:** These are permitted again, effective Sunday, January 31 (one day earlier than the originally planned date of February 1). This includes faith formation and sacramental preparation gatherings, youth gatherings, board and council meetings, organizational meetings and social activities. I am allowing these to resume on a Sunday to accommodate parishes that have faith formation gatherings on this day of the week.

Please see the revised *Parish/Diocesan Ministries COVID-19 Preparedness Guidance* attached to this email for updates to our protocols for these events/gatherings. Even after the resumption of in-person gatherings, parishes and schools must provide accommodations to allow the participation of people who cannot attend in-person events, activities, classes, meetings, etc., due to virus-related concerns. This flexibility allows us to serve our people during this challenging time while keeping them safe.

• **Use of church or school spaces by outside groups:** If a parish or school allows an outside group to use its spaces, the parish or school must ensure the group's activities adhere to the health and safety protocols stipulated in the updated parish/diocesan ministries guidance. This includes no meals.

• **Feast of St. Blase (February 3):** The guidance for the blessing of throats sent to you previously is attached again to this email for your convenience. I encourage you to consider offering this blessing at Sunday Masses Jan. 31 as well as on the actual feast day so that more people may benefit.

• **Ash Wednesday (February 17):** This year, in the Diocese of Saint Cloud, we will follow the guidance recently issued by the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments in its *Note on Ash Wednesday: Distribution of Ashes in Time of Pandemic* (attached to this email). Ashes should be sprinkled on the top of people's heads rather than using them to make a cross on people's foreheads.

The diocesan Office of Worship and Catholic Education Ministries have collaborated on a prayer service that families may use at home on Ash Wednesday if they are unable to attend church for any reason. Please watch for more information in the February *Monthly Diocesan Newsletter*.

- **Lenten fish fries:** These are permissible as drive-thru or take-out options only. These events must follow the food preparation safety provisions that I sent to you previously and that are outlined in the *Quick Guide to COVID-19 Protocols* on the diocese's coronavirus updates page: <https://stcdio.org/coronavirus-update>.

- **Outdoor weddings:** I realize that couples are approaching some parishes with requests for outdoor weddings this year. In light of the pandemic, I had granted permission for outdoor weddings to take place through Nov. 1, 2020, with the consent of the pastor. Outdoor weddings are now permissible until further notice. As before, they must be held on church property and physical-distancing must be observed. For more guidance regarding weddings, please refer to the guidelines for weddings during COVID-19 posted on the coronavirus updates page.

- **COVID-19 vaccine:** Previously, I sent you a copy of the column by Fr. Tom Knoblach that was published in the January issue of *The Central Minnesota Catholic* along with a document from the USCCB to help you answer parishioners' questions about the morality of currently available COVID-19 vaccines. Fr. Knoblach's column has been redesigned and formatted as a bulletin insert (attached). Please feel free to reproduce the insert and use it in any way that is helpful.

- **Webinar regarding PPP program:** You received an email invitation recently to attend an informational webinar for updates about the Payroll Protection Program at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, January 26. Please be sure to attend if it would be helpful for your parish.

Lastly, I want to thank all of you who joined me in making a contribution to assist with the diocese's bankruptcy settlement. I appreciate your willingness to help in this way with the financial obligations that we face as a diocesan church.

May God continue to bless you in your ministry.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Donald J. Kettler
+Donald J. Kettler
Bishop, Diocese of Saint Cloud