



Office of the Bishop
Diocese of Saint Cloud

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January 6, 2021

Dear Pastor,

In my Dec. 18th letter to you, I noted that we would continue the suspension of in-person gatherings and activities in our diocese until at least Feb. 1. I am continuing to monitor the status of the virus, and I have decided at this time to keep the Feb. 1 date in place.

While the situation with COVID-19 is showing continued signs of improvement, we are still waiting to see what impact holiday travel and multi-household family gatherings during the Christmas season may have on infection rates. Health officials also are monitoring the progress of a variant of the virus that is not yet widespread in the U.S. but is reportedly more easily transmitted.

I will make another assessment in the middle of the month and give you as much lead time as possible to make any adjustments regarding protocols. Again, my hope is that we can return to in-person gatherings after Feb. 1, but I encourage you to plan for a variety of possibilities for conducting activities, including faith formation, in light of the present uncertainties surrounding this virus. This would include planning for in-person, hybrid and distance-learning options. Please feel free to contact Catholic Education Ministries for support and assistance. CEM can be reached at cem@gw.stcldio.org or 320-251-0111.

The following are updates on a few other pandemic-related issues:

- **Gov. Walz has lifted the 250-person attendance cap on religious services**, he announced at his Jan. 6 press briefing. **The 50%-occupancy limitation remains in effect** with safe distancing and mask use. **The new order takes effect on Jan. 11**, so the cap remains in place for this weekend's Masses.
- **Guidance for the Blessing of Throats on the Memorial of St. Blase** (Feb. 3): Please read the document attached to this email from the Office of Worship titled "2021 Blessing of Throats." We will use this option for the blessing in lieu of blessing individual throats this year.
- **Guidance for the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday** (Feb. 17): Members of my staff are consulting with local and state health officials regarding the touching of foreheads and the level of risk involved for transmitting the virus. Once I have this information, I will make a decision regarding how ashes will be imposed/distributed in our parishes this year.

• Recent federal legislation approved by Congress and signed by President Trump includes a new round of **Paycheck Protection Program funding and additional assistance for non-public schools**. The diocese will host a webinar in the near future to provide more information to parishes and schools about this funding. Please watch your email for an invitation.

• **Returning to choir rehearsals**: Music is an essential part of liturgy, and our parishes have many talented choirs and vocal ensembles. With this in mind, I am now allowing choirs and vocal ensembles to return to rehearsals beginning Jan. 18. Please read the attached document from the Office of Worship, "Returning to Choir Rehearsals," for a list of requirements that these rehearsals must follow. Protocols for small vocal ensembles to return to singing during Mass are currently being formulated with the intention of granting permission for groups of up to six vocalists to resume ministry beginning with the First Sunday of Lent. The Office of Worship will host an evening Zoom meeting (date and time still pending) for all music ministers during which the protocols and best practices will be discussed. Congregational singing, however, is still not permitted. Also, choirs/vocal ensembles are still not permitted to sing during any public event, liturgy, Mass or otherwise, until further notice.

Thank you for everything you do for the people of God. May God bless you in your ministry and keep you healthy and safe in this new year.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

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