

## **What to Expect: Resuming the Celebration of Mass with a Congregation Present**

*Reopening the doors of our churches will take careful thought, understanding and cooperation.*

The decision to suspend all public Masses in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee was difficult and painful. For the first time in our lives, it was not possible to receive the Eucharist or attend Mass in person, and this was very painful. At the same time, we know that it was a necessary step to take in order to protect the health and well-being of all in our community. Even in this extraordinary time, the compassion, generosity, and creative responses from parishioners in our parishes and schools have been very encouraging.

As health restrictions begin to ease, it is important for all of us to understand that the process of resuming Mass with a congregation present will not be as straightforward as it was in suspending public Mass. Our Masses and in-person gatherings will not immediately go back to normal. Our patience and understanding will still be very important as we move forward.

We know how eager our parishes are to return to public Mass. Our beloved priests desire to celebrate Masses with our parishioners present once again. Indeed, all of us are filled with the desire to participate in the liturgy and receive the Eucharist. Many hearts are echoing the pleas of Psalm 42:3, “My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When can I enter and see the face of God?” While it is exciting that we are anticipating offering this option again soon, it is crucial that we approach this next phase with a patient, loving, kind and a charitable mindset.

The specific details of when and how public Mass will resume have yet to be fully determined, but here are five components of this next phase that all should be prepared for.

**1. A general dispensation from the Sunday obligation will remain.** Many people, especially those who are at risk of possible infection or illness, and those who care for them, are strongly encouraged to stay home and participate in live streamed Masses, which will continue. This also means that one can come to church for Mass on any day of the week (not just Sunday). This will help to give people more of a chance to celebrate Mass in person at least once a week.

**2. Attendance will be limited.** Some restrictions will remain on the capacity of large gatherings, so we are working with parishes to determine a fair way to cap

attendance for Masses. It is very important for everyone to be registered with their parish in order to receive communication about this next phase. Make sure that you are in the loop to receive updates about sign-up systems, assigned days, how many people can attend a given Mass and who those people may be, etc. Unfortunately, during this next phase, no one should expect to be able to attend Mass with regularity.

**3. Social Distancing will be practiced.** Expect your parish to have pews/rows that are roped off. Families will be asked to maintain 6 feet of separation from other families. Be prepared to wear a mask to Mass to guard against the potential spread of the virus.

**4. Liturgical changes will be in place.** Extra precautions will be taken, such as suspending the distribution of the Precious Blood and strongly recommending receiving the Host only on the hand.

**5. Anyone who attends public Mass will still be at risk.** Even with the best health practices and strict social distancing, anyone who enters a public space should be aware of the risk. Our churches will be cleaned thoroughly, but the risk of contracting COVID-19 remains.

Finally, let us all seek **progress and not perfection**. In this next phase, we will certainly meet some challenges and frustrations. Even after this next phase begins, your family may not be able to attend Mass for several weeks. Sign-up systems and parish communication may encounter difficulties, and some attendance strategies may not go according to plan.

It is encouraging to see COVID-19 numbers flatten and decrease. However, for the protection of our diocese and local communities, we do not want to contribute to a *rebound effect* that would push normalized Mass attendance even further into the future. If we all work together, we can ease back into this, incrementally adding more people and options at Mass.

Thank you for your patience through all of this. Please continue to pray for our diocese, our parishes and schools and our local communities as we navigate this next leg of the journey.