

Masks at Mass

In addition to the bishop's letter below regarding the mask mandate, priests and deacons were sent the following details from him. Please be aware of this and know that you can contact me about any questions, comments, and/or concerns. - Fr. Andrew

Legitimate exemptions would include individuals who cannot wear a mask because of a medical or psychological condition that precludes mask use. Conditions could include sensory sensitivities, extreme anxiety or fear of mask use, or severe skin conditions. These conditions are rare. It would be imprudent to pry into a person's claim that he or she is unable to wear a mask, but it is appropriate to ask individuals to wear a mask, by either empowering the greeters, or by asking parishioners privately before or after Mass. Some parishioners may be unsure if an exemption applies to them. One possible aid in discernment is to ask if there are any situations in which they can wear a mask. If a person can wear a mask at the store, or at a place of employment, or at the doctor's office, then they can wear a mask at Mass. This discernment should take place in private conversations.

Additionally there is the challenge of enforcement. Again, I do expect that our parishes ensure observance by the faithful. A parish should not forcibly remove parishioners who refuse to comply, instead they should provide direct correction to those individuals outside of Mass whenever possible. It would be valuable to offer catechesis on the binding nature of a legitimate command from a legitimate authority. As Cardinal Sarah wrote in *Let us Return to the Eucharist in Joy*, "A sure principle in order not to err is obedience... In times of difficulty (e.g., wars, pandemics), Bishops and Episcopal Conferences can give provisional norms which must be obeyed. Obedience safeguards the treasure entrusted to the Church." This obedience should not be presented as a burden to be endured, but as a freeing gift, an assurance that we are in harmony with the will of God, and a condition of possibility for any properly ordered community of love.

Finally, let us promote this requirement pastorally. There is significant frustration, loneliness and pain in our communities. Cardinal Sarah reminded us, "Due attention to hygiene and safety regulations cannot lead to the sterilization of gestures and rites, to the instilling, even unconsciously, of fear and insecurity in the faithful." A pastoral approach does not mean lowering expectations, but it does mean being sensitive to the wounds our people are suffering, accompanying with love those who struggle, and fostering peace and an experience of community even while physically distant.

Dear Friends in Christ,

I am acutely aware in the State of Iowa and in our country the incidence of infection, hospitalization, and mortality due to the coronavirus that causes Covid-19 is rising significantly just as we enter the holiday and winter seasons. I conclude that it is necessary to require face masks or coverings at all public Masses, sacramental celebrations, and other events in Church buildings in the Diocese of Des Moines, effective immediately. This requirement extends through February 2, 2021 (The Feast of the Presentation), at which time it will be reviewed. I have taken this critical step so we may responsibly continue to gather around the Eucharistic altar – the source and summit of our faith – and worship together.



The Eucharist is the pearl of great price won at the cost of Christ's saving sacrifice on the Cross. The personal and communal sacrifice entailed in wearing a mask, while it involves for many a yielding of our will and personal preference and comfort, pales in comparison to the privilege of participating in the Mass. Our ability to continue to experience God's grace in the sacramental life of the Church is directly linked to our ability to mitigate the risk of COVID infections; therefore, a mask requirement is prudent at this time. Moreover, simple charity obliges us to take into account the physical health of all parishioners as a way to ensure that worship is relatively safe and accessible to as many parishioners as possible. None of us wants to be the cause for someone else to withdraw or refrain from Mass attendance because certain members of a congregation fail to employ this basic means of protection for our neighbor.

This diocesan requirement applies to all those over the age of five, who do not have a medical or psychological condition prohibiting mask use. A personal preference opposed to mask use, or the belief that masks are not effective, does not qualify as a condition exempting one from mask use. If parishioners are unsure whether an exemption applies to them, they should consult with their pastor who can assist in discernment.

The Diocese asks parishes to communicate this requirement to all parishioners, and to ensure observance by the faithful. Again, the one thing needful is to be able to place ourselves at Jesus' feet, to heed his command to take, eat, and drink his Body and Blood. We are consoled and revived in our belief that Jesus continues to meet us in the Eucharist; we continue to support each other as the family of God, and we remain in God's providential care. As Cardinal Robert Sarah has reminded us in his letter, *Let us Return to the Eucharist with Joy*, "The Church will continue to cherish the human person as a whole. She bears witness to hope, invites us to trust in God, recalls that earthly existence is important, but much more important is eternal life: sharing the same life with God for eternity is our goal, our vocation."

The Sunday Mass obligation remains suspended. For those who do not attend Mass during the pandemic, God's infinite grace and mercy remain abundantly available.

Faithfully in Christ,

Most Rev. William M. Joensen, Ph.D.
Bishop of Des Moines