

Catholic Response to COVID-19

Update from the Archdiocese of Toronto

May 27, 2020

The decision to close our parish churches on March 24, 2020, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic was a very difficult one and we recognize the tremendous spiritual sacrifice of the faithful during this time. We also want to do all that we can to minimize the potential spread of Covid-19 in our community.

We know that you have questions and are anxious to return to your local parish. This update will let you know where we are at present and what we've been doing to prepare for the days ahead.

Thank you for your continued patience. We join in collective prayer, anticipating the day that we may all be together once again.

Q. How is the Archdiocese of Toronto preparing for re-opening?

A. Four archdiocesan task forces have been addressing the following pandemic-related issues:

1. Re-opening of churches;
2. Re-opening of offices;
3. Financial implications and related issues; and
4. Best practices that can be implemented post-pandemic.

We are also working closely with the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario (ACBO) to offer dioceses and churches a consistent approach to re-opening across the province. All this work has been done in consultation with health and safety experts.

We've held virtual town halls with our clergy and staff, to keep them apprised of our plans along the way. Pastors have been communicating directly with the faithful in a variety of ways – through the parish website, by mail, text, phone and through social media.

Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto, has provided regular updates to the faithful. These and other Covid-19 related resources can be accessed by visiting: www.archtoronto.org/covid19.

Q. Why not re-open the churches now?

A. Throughout this process, we have been part of conversations and meetings with all levels of government to advocate for re-opening places of worship as soon as it is safe to do so. We've also discussed the unique nature of our worship spaces, how we plan to create a safe environment for the faithful and we've shared our draft plans for re-opening.

While we would all like to re-open right away, we must do so thoughtfully and responsibly, as we do everything possible to ensure the safety of all. As Cardinal Collins wrote in his May 7 statement to the faithful, *"We should also recall that we Christians defend the sanctity of human life from the first moment*

of conception until natural death: in a time of pestilence, that commitment of ours requires us to follow the reasonable norms designed to protect the lives of those around us.”

Q. I understand the Province of Ontario has amended its Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act, to allow for drive-in religious services. Can we have an outdoor Mass at my parish?

A. The amendment was passed; however, it contains several restrictions which would not make the celebration of Holy Mass feasible. Parking lot Masses are not permitted in the Archdiocese of Toronto.

Q. When will we re-open churches?

A. That is the question on everyone’s minds. Unfortunately, we can’t give you a firm date at this time. We rely on the direction of the top health officials in our province who have expertise in pandemic planning. Once they indicate it is safe to do so, we will re-open churches when we are confident that parishes can provide a safe environment for the faithful. We are planning for a phased re-opening, similar to what is being done in churches around the world.

Q. What will it look like when we re-open churches?

A. The re-opening period will require a number of changes from our pre-pandemic operations. We anticipate that capacity limits will be necessary once churches re-open, beginning with smaller numbers and increasing as it is safe to do so. Physical distancing (2 metres/6 feet) measures will also be introduced and our desire to socialize as a faith community will be limited for a period of time. Enhanced worship space cleaning measures will also be required at and before every Mass. These require significant supplies and volunteers to ensure they are implemented properly. We are working with experts to finalize the specific measures that will be required.

Q. How about weddings, funerals and baptisms? What is the status of these sacramental celebrations?

A. Weddings and baptisms can proceed at present but are limited by the guidelines of local health authorities to 5 people including the celebrant. Funerals continue with a limit of 10 people. We recognize these numbers create anxiety and frustration for many people. We anticipate as churches begin to re-open these numbers will increase. However at this time, we cannot give an indication of what those numbers will be and when they can happen.

Q. What about First Communion and Confirmation celebrations for children of sacramental age that are scheduled to take place around this time of year?

A. These celebrations are not able to take place at this time. Whether these are re-scheduled to the fall or to a date in 2021 is largely dependent on how soon we are able to return to church in greater numbers. We will continue to keep you informed as plans are finalized.

Q. What about candidates for Baptism or reception into the full communion of the Catholic Church that were scheduled to take place at the Easter Vigil?

A. The Baptism of candidates or their reception into the Catholic Church can take place on an individual basis within the limits imposed by the health authorities, of 5 people, including the minister. Alternatively, these liturgical celebrations should be the focus of attention when churches re-open.

Q. Where is Mass televised/offered online?

A. While we recognize it is not the same as attending Mass at your local church, there are many opportunities to watch daily or Sunday Mass. Visit www.archtoronto.org/covid19 and click on “Watch the Mass” – you’ll find options for daily Mass with Cardinal Collins from St. Michael’s Cathedral as well as links to parish celebrations offered each Sunday (or in some cases more frequently). The daily televised Mass, produced by the National Catholic Broadcasting Council, airs on a number of networks including Salt & Light Catholic Television, YesTV and VisionTV. Consult your local listings or visit www.DailyTVMass.com for a full schedule.

While public Masses are currently suspended, priests across the Archdiocese of Toronto celebrate daily Mass – be assured that your parish priest is praying for you daily throughout this period of pandemic.

Q. How can I help?

A. As noted, we will need significant volunteer assistance as we re-open churches. If you would like to offer your time and talents to assist at your local parish, please contact them and let them know you’d like to help and your availability. You can also visit: www.archtoronto.org/covid19 to learn about additional volunteer opportunities with local charities.

We’ve also been heartened by the many parishioners who have asked how they can continue to financial support their parish. A number of donation options are available including credit card, pre-authorized giving or dropping off your donation at the parish office. You can learn more about financially supporting your parish by visiting our website: holyfamilywhitby.ca