
GUIDELINES ON LITURGICAL PRACTICES DURING THE COLD AND FLU SEASON*

As we continue through the winter cold and flu season on our way to the warmer days of spring, it's a good time to review some common sense liturgical practices and issues to help everyone stay healthy and to care for one another as we gather each week for Mass and other parish activities.

If you are sick, take care of yourself

Encourage those who are sick with a cold or the flu to care for the Body of Christ by first taking care of their own body. Reassure them that the obligation to participate in Mass is not required for those who are sick (if they are worried about the obligation, they can ask their pastor for a dispensation). In fact, the Church honors sickness and those who are sick with special rites and prayers and cares especially for those who are unable to come to Mass because of sickness.

For Church ministers, it's often hard for us to stay home and care for ourselves when we're ill. We tend to push ourselves over our limits because we want so much to do our ministry and to help others. But let's also remember the safety announcement we hear before every flight: "Put your mask on first, and then assist others." Take care of yourself so that you can take care of others.

Now don't go posting signs up on your Church doors or bulletins like this one I saw in big, red, bold letters: **"Please do not come to Mass if you are sick!"** There are better ways to communicate this message. Here is one suggestion:

If you are sick, do not worsen your illness by trying to get to Church. One of our priests or pastoral ministers would be happy to bring the

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Word of God and Holy Communion to you if you need to stay home because of illness or because you are caring for a sick family member. Also, if you are seriously ill, the Church wants to celebrate with you the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. Contact the parish office at [insert phone number here] so we may care for you and your loved ones during your time of illness.

Wash your hands often, especially if you are a greeter, usher, or Communion minister

Soap, water, and a good scrubbing are the best defense against the cold and flu viruses. Scrub your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds—the time it takes to say two quick "Hail Mary's." If you are not near soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand cleanser or disposable hand wipe. Keep a small bottle or packet in your purse or pocket.

Don't cough or sneeze into your hands

Use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, then throw it away. If you don't have a tissue handy, do what food-service workers are taught to do: cough or sneeze into your shirt sleeve and avoid touching the area of fabric you coughed into.

Avoid shaking hands with others before, during, and after Mass if you are sick or have been sneezing or coughing

This is just common sense, and you wouldn't be considered anti-social if you are sick. But try not to go overboard either on the giving *or* receiving end. If you are sick, greet each other warmly before Mass, but avoid hand to hand contact. Use a tissue if you need to sneeze or cough, and throw it away. At the Sign of Peace, you can offer a simple bow of the head to those around you. If you have come in direct contact with someone who has been sneezing or coughing, avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with your hands until you

can wash them. This is a good practice at anytime since germs can spread when we touch our eyes, nose, or mouth.

Refrain from receiving Communion on the tongue or from the Cup if you are sick

Although receiving both the Body and Blood of Christ are encouraged, you only need to receive one form if you are unable to receive both. If you are accustomed to receiving Communion on the tongue, prevent spreading your saliva to the hand of the Communion minister by receiving Communion in the hand while you are sick.

Pray for the sick and evaluate your ministry to the sick

This cold and flu season is also a good time for parishes to evaluate its ministry to the sick and its full use of the rites and options in the Pastoral Care of the Sick. Remember also to include at Mass and other parish liturgies intercessions for those who are sick, for their caregivers, for those who have died because of sickness, and especially for those who suffer with no one to care for them.

If Communion ministers need to clean their hands during Mass, do this discretely

The best way for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion to clean their hands during the Mass is in their pew, using a sanitizing liquid or antibacterial wipe, just before they come to the sanctuary. The reason for this is that it becomes distracting and inappropriate to see a line of Communion ministers standing near the altar, first, getting a squirt of sanitizing liquid in their hands (the action looks too much like Communion), then, vigorously rubbing their hands just before Communion begins. I've also heard reports of Communion ministers trying to shake off the excess liquid from their hands as they are about to receive Communion. This is just bad form and often looks ridiculous.

Remember, if Communion ministers have practiced good hygiene during the Mass and are not sick, there is no obligation for them to wash their hands again during Mass. But if they need to wash their hands during Mass, give your Communion ministers their own travel-size bottle or packet of wipes so they can clean their hands more discreetly in their pews. If this cannot be done, Communion ministers can wash their hands in the sacristy as they come forward to the sanctuary. Anything you do should not delay any part of the Communion Rite or distract from the focus at the altar.

Whatever you do, don't place a bottle of sanitizing liquid on the altar (I have seen this!) or among the Communion vessels and other sacred items on the side table (I have seen this too). These areas are visually too prominent, and all you will see from the assembly's vantage point is the soap bottle.

Should the presider wash his hands as well or does the ritual purifying at the lavabo suffice?

If he has practiced good hygiene and common sense during the Mass and he is not sick, there is no need for him to wash his hands before distributing Communion. (The ritual washing of hands during the preparation of gifts is a ritual act of purification; it is not intended to be a hygienic action.) If he is sick, it's best that he not preside at the Mass. If this is not possible and he must preside while he is sick, the duty of distributing Communion to the assembly can be done by other ordinary ministers: assisting deacons and concelebrants at the Mass. If these are not available, he may permit extraordinary ministers to distribute Communion to the assembly.

How can we prevent panic or alarm during the cold and flu season?

If concerns arise, assure parishioners and your ministers that the usual liturgical practices of the Catholic Church are not dangerous to one's

health when exercised with ordinary common sense. Yet in order to help lessen the spread of naturally existing germs that are more prevalent during the cold and flu season, everyone should be more attentive to their own daily health practices, especially if they themselves are sick.

Catholics cannot be Catholic by themselves. We must gather together in order to worship as Jesus directed us. We cannot lock ourselves away into our own personal “upper rooms” in order to safeguard our health, nor can we put others at risk by our own behaviors. Since we are a communal church, I hope these are helpful reminders to you to catechize parishioners all year long about good hygiene and standard considerate behavior when one is sick. Also help parents teach children about good hygiene etiquette when one is healthy and when one is sick.

The axiom, *lex orandi lex credendi*, tells us that our liturgy teaches us what we believe. Our rites teach us to remain faithful to each other “in sickness and in health.” Our Scripture readings proclaim to us, “fear not, the Lord is in your midst.” We need not fear each other. We do need to care for each other—this cold and flu season and all throughout the year. As a Church, we embrace sickness and death, for the sick themselves, in their very bodies, exercise a special ministry. They are visible signs of God’s enduring love, a love so strong that it took on the frailty of human life and suffered our daily aches, pains, and illnesses all the way to death. As a people of faith, let us honor the God who became human by caring for one another.
