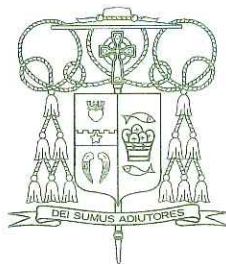


DIOCESE OF SAN ANGELO

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A Message on Returning to Sacramental Life Most Rev. Michael J. Sis Bishop of San Angelo April 30, 2020

We are living through a time of tremendous suffering in our world, facing the coronavirus pandemic as well as a major economic downturn. Along with our brothers and sisters around the world, we mourn the loss of those who have died, and we pray for all those impacted by COVID-19.

As Catholics, a major sacrifice for us has been the inability to gather together at the altar of the Lord and receive the Eucharist in the community of faith. We need the sanctifying grace of the sacraments, especially Confession and Communion. The eucharistic sacrifice is the very "source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 11).

On Monday, April 27, 2020, Governor Greg Abbott issued *Executive Order GA 18* relating to the reopening of some activities in Texas. On that same date, the Office of the Attorney General in Texas updated its *Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis*. In light of those developments, the Catholic Church in the Diocese of San Angelo is now preparing for a phased reopening of the celebration of public Masses.

In some areas of our diocese, there are many new cases of COVID-19 every day. In other areas, there have been very few or no cases at all. The virus is still here among us, and it will be with us for some time to come. New flareups could occur at any time and place. Therefore, in order to protect innocent human life, our process of returning to Mass in our churches must be prudent and measured. We must not allow our excitement and zeal to hinder our good judgment.

When we gather together in person, we must follow the health protocols listed in the document *Guidance for Houses of Worship During the COVID-19 Crisis*. These require our parishes to take precautions that include the use of various supplies that need to be acquired, and which are not easy to find in some of the more remote parts of our diocese. They also require the training of parish staff and volunteers in new protocols to fight the spread of contagion.

In the Diocese of San Angelo, the return to the public celebration of Mass with distribution of Holy Communion will be done in a way that is safe, gradual, and ordered. This will require careful preparation, good communication, and patience. Throughout this process, we must take into account both the physical and spiritual welfare of our people.

The gradual opening of Texas will be carried out in phases, and the same will be true for the Church. Not all parishes will necessarily begin public Masses on the same date. Before a particular parish or mission moves to the next phase, the pastor must assure that the required safety training and supplies are all in place. Because some of those supplies are difficult to obtain these days, all should be patient for the sake of public safety.

In any given area, if a new flareup of the coronavirus should occur, then the Church in that area must move back to a previous phase for the sake of public health.

Sunday Obligation:

Until further notice, Catholics in the Diocese of San Angelo continue to be dispensed from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays. Those who do not receive Communion are encouraged to make an Act of Spiritual Communion. A text for this prayer is available at www.sanangelodiocese.org.

Before Receiving Permission to Move to Phase One:

Before beginning Phase One, a parish celebrates non-public Masses without a congregation, in order to protect public health. In this situation, it is recommended that the parish Mass be made available to the parishioners through livestreaming, Internet, pre-recording, television, or radio. Communion may be distributed to the people outside of Mass, using sanitary precautions.

Phase One:

When all the necessary preparations have been made, a pastor may request permission from the bishop for his parish or mission to proceed to Phase One. When a parish has been given permission by the bishop to move to Phase One, the pastor has the option of using any of the following approaches, or a combination of them:

- Remote Transmission of Mass
- Parking Lot Mass
- Distribution of Holy Communion Outside of Mass
- Reduced-Crowd Indoor Public Mass

Here I will present a few highlights of the minimum health protocols that we must follow during Phase One.

In Phase One, I join with our state government in encouraging our churches to continue conducting as many activities as possible remotely. I have been impressed by the efforts of our parishes to livestream their Masses. This will continue to be very important for our people.

During this phase, the following at-risk persons are strongly encouraged to stay home and participate remotely: those who are age 65 or older, or who have serious underlying medical conditions, or who are sick. Alternatively, an area may be designated inside the facility reserved

for the at-risk population, or a separate Mass may be offered for the at-risk population only. Those at-risk persons who are not able to come to the Church may contact the parish to request someone to bring them Communion at home.

Proper Spacing is Required in Mass:

Every other row must be left empty. There should be at least six feet of separation between parties in any row, except as follows:

- Two or more members of the same household may sit adjacent to one another, with six feet of separation on either side.
- Two individuals who are not members of the same household but who are attending together may sit adjacent to one another, with six feet of separation on either side.

These spacing requirements also apply to those in choirs and music groups.

Because of the spacing requirements of Phase One will severely limit the number of people who are able to enter, it is acceptable for our churches to celebrate Mass in their larger buildings, such as the parish hall or gym, in order to accommodate more people.

Health Protocols:

All attendees over the age of two are to wear face masks or cloth face coverings (over the nose and mouth) in the church.

Clergy, staff, and volunteers are to wear face masks or cloth face coverings (over the nose and mouth) during the Mass. These include the priest presider, deacons, readers as they proclaim the readings, choirs as they sing, and Communion ministers as they distribute Communion.

Between Masses, it will be necessary to disinfect the pews, chairs, and other surfaces. Hymn books and other resources must be removed from the pews and during this phase, and they will not be returned until the coronavirus outbreak has passed.

Those who greet people at the entrances of churches should refrain from physical contact, instead using smiles, eye contact, kind words, and waves. In this particular time of public health concern over the coronavirus, we should refrain from holding hands during the Lord's Prayer. Whenever the sign of peace is exchanged, it should be done without shaking hands. Some gestures that might be used are a smile, eye contact, a simple bow of the head, or a wave.

Offertory Collection:

To minimize risk of the transmission of the virus, collection baskets will not be passed through the pews. Instead, a central basket or other container will be made available for donations. I ask all to be as generous as possible to help keep our precious parishes and missions afloat.

Distribution of Holy Communion:

The Precious Blood is not to be distributed during this phase. As a temporary measure due to the current pandemic, Communion is to be distributed in the hand only, not on the tongue. This is in service of the common good (canon 223). Those receiving Communion will remove their face mask or face covering only at the moment of consuming the host, and then immediately put it back on.

Conclusion of the Mass:

After the final blessing, people are to leave the church progressively, not all at once. This will help maintain safe social distancing.

A Final Word:

As your local bishop, I ask everyone for patience, assistance, and prayers, as we try our best to adapt to these measures to fight the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. We must not let down our guard in our fight against this deadly disease.

We are living through a tragic period of human history. You are in my prayers every day, asking God to give you all the graces you need to grow in wisdom and love through the suffering and hardships of these difficult times.

In the joy of Christ's service,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Michael J. Sis". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Rev. Michael J. Sis
Bishop of San Angelo