

Chapter VIII: Winter & Ordinary Time

St. Blase Blessing of Throats

Ten Questions on Influenza and the Liturgy

Throughout the years, the BCL Newsletter has addressed the liturgical implications of the transmission of pathogens on numerous occasions. As the flu season once again approaches, the Secretariat for the Liturgy has consulted with experts and offers the following brief reflections on “influenza and the Liturgy.”

1. What is influenza?

According to the Centers for Disease Control “influenza (commonly called ‘the flu’) is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Infection with influenza viruses can result in severe illness and life-threatening complications. An estimated 10% to 20% of U.S. residents get the flu each year: an average of 114,000 people are hospitalized for flu-related complications and 36,000 Americans die each year from complications of flu.”

2. Why is there particular concern for the spread of influenza?

Various concerns with the availability and efficacy of influenza vaccines have again raised issues of concern.

3. What is the best way to prevent the transmission of the influenza virus?

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), “as with other infectious illnesses, one of the most important and appropriate preventive practices is careful and frequent hand hygiene. Cleaning your hands often using either soap and water or waterless alcohol-based hand sanitizers removes potentially infectious materials from your skin and helps prevent disease transmission.”

4. How is the influenza virus transmitted?

According to the CDC, “influenza viruses are spread when a person who has the flu coughs, sneezes, or speaks and spreads virus into the air, and other people inhale the virus. When these viruses enter the nose, throat, or lungs of a person, they begin to multiply, causing symptoms of the flu.

5. Does transmission of the flu require direct contact between persons?

The viruses can also be spread when a person touches a surface with flu viruses on it (for example, a door handle) and then touches his or her nose or mouth. A person who is sick with the flu can spread viruses - that means they are contagious. Adults may be contagious from one day before developing symptoms to up to seven days after getting sick. Children can be contagious for longer than seven days.”

6. How can the spread of the influenza virus be prevented?

While the single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each fall, the CDC recommends these other ways to prevent the flu: “Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick too; stay home when you are sick. If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from catching your illness; cover your mouth and nose. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent those around you from getting sick; clean your hands. Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs; Avoid touching

your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.”

7. In previous years, what has the Church done in localities where the outbreak of Influenza is most significant?

In those localities where the outbreak of the disease has been the most significant, bishops have introduced several liturgical adaptations in regard to such practices as the distribution of Holy Communion and the exchange of the Sign of Peace in order to limit the spread of contagion.

8. What measures should be taken in Roman Catholic liturgies in the United States of America now?

Priests, deacons, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should be especially reminded of the need to practice good hygiene. Ministers of Holy Communion should be encouraged to wash their hands before Mass begins, or even to use an alcohol based anti-bacterial solution before and after distributing Holy Communion. They should instruct people who feel ill not to receive from the cup.

9. What about further adaptations or the restriction of options at Mass?

The Diocesan Bishop should always be consulted regarding any changes or restriction of options in the celebration of Roman Catholic Liturgy. However, the need for the introduction of widespread liturgical adaptations for the prevention of the transmission of influenza in the dioceses of the United States of America is not evident at this time.

10. What is the Secretariat for the Liturgy doing to address this question?

The Secretariat will continue to closely monitor the situation and provide the best advice possible to Diocesan Bishops and their Offices for Worship. The Secretariat likewise appreciates whatever information Diocesan Offices for Worship are able to provide concerning local conditions and the pastoral responses developed by Diocesan Bishops. Continuously updated information is available from the Centers for Disease Control at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>.

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The Liturgy and Pandemic Flu or Disease¹

In recent years, the USCCB Secretariat for the Liturgy has worked closely with the United States Centers for Disease Control and medical advisors to provide appropriate advisories concerning the Liturgy and public health. Such advisories have summarized current medical judgments concerning specific practices (Communion from the Cup, Communion on the Tongue, Kiss of Peace, etc.) and diseases (influenza, SARS).

The most recent advisory was published in the December, 2005 edition of the BCL Newsletter at the outset of the annual “flu season” and was particularly concerned with the distinction between typical annual outbreaks of influenza and the much discussed potential “bird flu” pandemic.

Following the June, 2006 meeting of the Committee on the Liturgy, Bishop Trautman wrote to all Bishops, recommending possible courses of action on this question. In addition to practical

¹ www.usccb.org/liturgy/innews/July2006.pdf

suggestions for diocesan planning, Bishop Trautman recommended two reliable websites on the question, both associated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

<http://pandemicflu.gov> <http://pandemicflu.gov/plan/faithcomchecklist.html>

Among the most important recommendations offered to the Bishops is important advice which applies to all circumstances where the potential for the transmission of pathogens is a significant risk:

All parishioners should be encouraged to remain home at the first sign of illness, out of respect for their brothers and sisters. During the time of the pandemic, even if schools and public institutions are not closed, parishioners should be reminded of the importance of basic health measures.

Hand-washing is a necessary and effective means of preventing the delivery of infectious material (e.g., nasal secretions, saliva or other body fluids that may contain viruses) from soiled hands to the mouth, nose or eyes, where it can enter the body. Cleaning one's hands with soap and water removes potentially infectious material from one's skin. Hands should be cleaned before preparing food, eating, or touching one's face and after handling soiled material (e.g., used tissues, lavatory surfaces, and door knobs), shaking hands, coughing or sneezing, and using the toilet. Waterless alcohol-based hand gels may be used when soap is not available and hands are not visibly soiled.

Most importantly, Bishop Trautman encouraged all Bishops to convey a clear, considered, and careful response to any potential pandemic and to avoid any possibilities of panic in the face of a potential pandemic.