



Secretariat of Divine Worship

3211 FOURTH STREET NE · WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 · 202-541-3060 · FAX 202-541-3088

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Your Eminence / Your Excellency:

In response to a number of calls that have been made to the Secretariat of Divine Worship, I would like to share with you two items. The first contains guidelines in case the new swine flu becomes a pandemic. The second is general information about the disease itself.

Liturgical Guidelines

From a liturgical perspective there are several concerns which bishops should be prepared to address regarding a potential pandemic and the celebration of the Sacraments. The Committee on Divine Worship has, therefore, reviewed and approved this advisory for use by Bishops in the development of diocesan plans.

Sunday Mass

When governments indicate closure of schools for a period of time, it is recommended that Bishops consider dispensing people from Sunday Mass obligation during the time the schools or other public institutions are closed. It is also advisable that, in such circumstances, all parish meetings, sports, or other public events be cancelled until the wave of infection has come to a conclusion.

When Sunday Mass is not a possibility, parishioners might be encouraged to read the readings for Sunday Mass and pray over them (these are available in many publications and online at www.USCCB.org/nab). The Committee on Divine Worship would also provide extensive online resources for prayer in a time of widespread illness in the event of such an outbreak. Bishops might also consider, if the situation allows, using diocesan or public media such as television, radio, or internet to broadcast Masses and other liturgical rites and prayers for those unable to participate in person. Pastors could offer the use of parish facilities as sites for vaccinations or other health care services in more extreme circumstances.

At the celebration of Masses, the exchange of the sign of peace might be suspended for a time and temporary restrictions on the distribution of Holy Communion on the tongue or from the chalice may be suggested. Both before and after distribution of the Eucharist to the congregation, ministers should be encouraged to practice hand-washing and perhaps even using waterless hand gels. Pastors should make sure that the vessels used at Mass, once purified, are thoroughly washed with soap and hot water after use.

Illness of the Priest

Preliminary plans should be made in parishes where there is only one priest for the eventuality that the priest himself might become sick. If a priest cannot be found to celebrate the Eucharist then, at the discretion of the bishop, deacons or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion might be deputed to celebrate *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* in such cases.

Penance

During the time of a pandemic, the availability of confessions may be limited. Confessions could be arranged in special circumstances by appointment. To limit the possible spread of germs, the penitent should be instructed to keep three to six feet distance from the priest. If the person is infected he/she should have tissues and be asked to cover his/her mouth and nose when coughing and to put the tissues into a wastepaper basket or box.

Anointing of the Sick

If a person's sickness has become so critical that he/she is in danger of death, the priest attending to the person may wear a surgical mask when he is in close contact with the person (three feet or closer). If it is in a health care setting, the priest should follow whatever guidelines have been established regarding contact precautions. Here, as is so often said, one of the most important practices is careful and frequent hand washing. Cleaning hands with soap and water removes potentially infectious material from one's skin. Waterless alcohol based hand gels may be used when soap is not available and hands are not visibly soiled.

Baptisms, Confirmation, and Marriages

During the time of a suspected pandemic, the celebration of these sacraments, if quarantine has not been put in place, should be done in small groups. Friends and family members should not attend if they feel they have been exposed to the flu. Again, basic hand washing should be practiced by all. Preliminary plans should be in place in case the only priest available in the parish is sick. Dialogue with neighboring parishes may also prove helpful in this regard.

Illness of the Bishop

If the bishop becomes ill or there is quarantine, celebration of Confirmation may have to be put off for a year in affected parishes, or the bishop might choose to delegate a priest to administer the sacrament in those parishes.

General Information and Precautions

Numerous resources developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can be found on the web at www.CDC.gov/swineflu. Besides providing information on the national level, this site also provides links to other information prepared by other government agencies at www.PandemicFlu.gov.

Some of you may recall that during the threat of the avian flu in 2006, it was suggested at dioceses develop a preparedness plan. To help you with a review of your plans, you may wish to visit the link to the Faith-Based & Community Organizations Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Checklist (www.PandemicFlu.gov/plan/faithcomchecklist.html).

The CDC materials predict that in any infected community, a pandemic outbreak will most likely last between six and eight weeks. Multiple waves (periods during which community outbreaks occur across the country) of illness could also occur, with each wave lasting from two to three months. Historically, the largest waves have occurred in the fall and winter, but the seasonability of a pandemic cannot be predicted with certainty.

General Precautions

All parishioners who show the first signs of illness should be encouraged to remain at 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 bodily 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.

We include with this letter a resource of ten questions on the swine flu. This response will also appear on the website of the Secretariat, www.USCCB.org/liturgy.

May the Lord help us to be of assistance and encouragement to our people in their time of trial.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Arthur J. Serratelli". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Arthur J. Serratelli
Bishop of Paterson
Chairman, Committee on Divine Worship