



—The Roman Catholic Diocese of—
BATON ROUGE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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On April 22 Gov. John Bel Edwards presented new guidance concerning our response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and these guidelines allow us the opportunity to begin opening our churches to full capacity again. In considering these new guidelines, I want us to be aware that COVID is still spreading, even if at low and stable levels, and this should be a part of our consideration. To pretend that the danger is completely over could sabotage all the efforts and progress we have made up to this point. Yet with this caution acknowledged, I want to offer for the first time since this pandemic began a more proactive process to bring us all back together in our churches again.

Most of the guidelines the governor has modified deal with the wearing of masks in gatherings outside and inside of buildings. Each of these is modified depending on the amount and possibility of physical distancing. *Of particular importance for gathering in church is the guideline that allows the option to gather at full capacity for Mass if masks are worn.*

Because it is my desire to be able to invite more of our parishioners back to Mass and have a place for them as they return, ***I have decided that we will keep the mandate to wear masks and begin to lessen the physical distancing as more parishioners return to church.*** Many church parishes now are struggling to maintain some physical distancing as more parishioners return to Sunday Mass after being vaccinated.

While some parishes still use every other pew, especially where they have a large church and a smaller congregation, many others are already using every pew. I encourage all our pastors, where they are able and if the people seem in support, to open all your pews and encourage physical distancing of four to six feet, to begin with, letting the parishioners find their comfort zones. ***Of course, at this time, we will require that all worshipers be masked.***

I think wearing masks and reducing physical distancing as needed reflects our experience that even in parishes where physical distancing has mostly disappeared, but masks are worn, the virus is not easily spread at Mass if at all.

Simply stressing the wearing of masks allows us to move to fuller capacity and still have the most effective practice in place to reduce any further spread. By adopting this preference for masks your pastors can simplify our Sunday practices and allow us to issue a simple, positive and hopeful invitation, ***“Wear your mask and return to Mass!”***

Since with this change we can accommodate everyone who wishes to return to Mass, I have decided that, as long as we are able to continue to reduce the spread of COVID in our diocese and state, I plan to formally lift the *dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass* on June 6, the feast of Corpus Christi. This will allow us, with the use of masks, to move to 100% capacity as people return to Mass.

Of course, I want to assure all our Catholic faithful if they are unvaccinated, or if they have underlying conditions which make the virus more dangerous, or if they are simply fearful, that they should consider

themselves exempt from the obligation to attend Mass for these reasons and therefore will not need a special dispensation.

The reduction of physical distancing with the use of masks will happen at a different pace in every parish, but we will continue to move in this direction so that we can invite everyone back without worrying about having a place for them at Mass. So, after 14 months of restrictive guidelines, I now with cautious and prayerful optimism issue a simple and hopeful message: ***“Wear your mask and return to Mass!”***

+Michael G. Duca
Bishop of Baton Rouge