

5 June 2020

Dear Parishioners,

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused changes to the way we live our lives and function as a society. Many of these changes were instituted in order to help fight the pandemic. The same is true for our lives as Catholics. Over the past several months, we have seen the suspension of public Masses, something that was perhaps unthinkable beforehand. While this has certainly upended our usual weekend routine and perhaps been a source of suffering and longing as we hope to return to Mass, it has also been an opportunity for us to double down on practicing our faith, putting forth that effort with the help of God's grace to do what we can to practice the faith at home. It has also been an opportunity for us to stand in better solidarity with those Catholics around the world who regularly are unable to attend Mass due to the lack of priests or the persecution of the Church.

Fortunately, things are beginning to turn around. We see the progress made throughout society to combat this virus. As a result of this progress, the various societal restrictions that were put in place are being amended and loosened. Similarly, we are now preparing to once again resume public Masses at the parish. Like elsewhere in society, the resumption of public Masses throughout the Diocese is not without challenges and changes. Just as we have changes to how we interact when we go to the bank, to the grocery store, or to the park, so too will there be changes to how we attend Mass. These changes were implemented in order to continue to protect us as best as possible from the COVID-19 virus while also allowing us to begin to return to parish life. The Diocese of Rockford, along with the Archdiocese of Chicago and the other dioceses in Illinois, put together a parish reopening plan in consultation with the Office of the Governor. This plan, while generic, was then later tailored to the specific situations in each of the Illinois dioceses. The Diocese of Rockford has a webpage dedicated to the reopening of parishes, and it can be found here: <https://www.rockforddiocese.org/covid-19/reopen-rockford/>.

In order to help prepare all of us for the reopening of St. Mary Parish, I am sending this letter to parishioners in order to detail the changes that have been implemented. These changes affect what is done before Mass, what is done during Mass, and what is done after Mass. They also address how confessions will work. I know that this is a lengthy letter, but please read this letter carefully and completely as some of these changes will be very different from the way we are used to doing things. Again, these changes have been put in place in order to help mitigate the risks associated with the COVID-19 virus, but we must also recognize that not all risks can be removed. Just like when we venture out to buy groceries, go to the post office, or do other activities, there is still some level of risk of contagion involved. Please be attentive to these changes, please abide by them, please be courteous – as I know you will be – to the volunteers who are helping implement the resumption of public Masses at the parish, and please be patient as we try to adapt to a situation that the vast majority of people in the world have never had to deal with before.

Throughout the suspension of public Masses, the parish has been sending updates, including links to a weekly homily and the weekly bulletin, through various means of online communication, including the parish website, the parish Facebook page, and the parish app. As a reminder, the parish website is www.stmarypecatonica.org, and the parish Facebook page is www.facebook.com/StMaryPecatonica. You can download the parish app by texting “APP” (without the quotes) to 88202 or by searching for the myParish app (developed by Diocesan Publications, Inc.) on the Apple App Store or Google Play Store. After installing the app on your phone or tablet, select our parish from the parish list. Finally, earlier this year the St. Mary’s Guild had forms at the Masses in order to collect parishioners’ current contact information. If you did not fill out a form and would like to do so now so the parish has the most current information, please contact Penny Wiegert at pwiegert@rockforddiocese.org; she can send you a fillable form that can be electronically filled out and returned.

Public weekend Masses are scheduled to resume the weekend of 13-14 June 2020; we will look into resuming daily Mass at a later date. First and foremost, **anyone with a cough of any sort, and anyone feeling sick, should not come to church for any reason.** The Diocese of Rockford encourages those who are 65 years old or older, as well as those who have underlying health conditions, to remain at home during this time. Even while public Masses resume, Bishop Malloy has continued the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass; while this dispensation continues, there is no sin for not fulfilling the obligation to attend Sunday Mass.

The number of people who can attend each particular Mass is limited. Initially, Masses are limited to 10 people (not counting the priest, lector, and greeter/usher volunteers). After that, we will be able to allow more people to attend each Mass. As the situation in Illinois changes, this number may be further adjusted by the Diocese in collaboration with the Office of the Governor. **All those who attend Mass who are 2 years old or older are required to wear a face mask.** Please bring your own face masks with you. While the parish has a limited supply of masks, the parish cannot supply masks for everyone since the masks are primarily needed for the volunteers who are helping facilitate the Masses. If for some reason you are unable to wear a face mask, please do not attend Mass at this time. While at the church, **social distancing of 6 feet must be maintained at all times by those who are not from the same immediate family.**

Changes Before Mass

The first major change to how Mass operates at this time is that **those who wish to attend Mass must sign up beforehand** online for the Mass they wish to attend; **walk-ins are not permitted at this time.** This is because the capacity at each particular Mass is limited. While there are a variety of methods which could be used to limit this capacity, they all have advantages and disadvantages. An online signup system has the most advantages with the fewest disadvantages. When you sign up for a Mass, you will need to give the names of those who will be in attendance, the number of people in attendance (including all infants and children), contact information (at

least a phone number but optionally an e-mail address as well), and indicate whether you will need the elevator. The parish needs to maintain a list of who was at which Mass so that contact tracing can be done in the event that someone later tests positive for COVID-19. For those who do not have internet access or who have difficulty using the online signup system, please contact a family member or a parishioner you know who could assist you if you would like to sign up for Mass. You can sign up for Masses at this website: www.stmarypecatonica.org/mass-signup. This website will have further directions about signing up for Mass. Please check this website regularly for updates about the current capacity at the Masses, as well as any updates to the signup procedure.

Volunteers and I have prepared the church for the resumption of public Masses by, among other things, establishing a traffic pattern through the building. Please do not congregate outside before Mass. **Please enter the building through the bell tower door.** All the other doors will be locked. Only those people who need to use the elevator should come to the elevator door, and a volunteer will let them in. The capacity of the elevator is limited to 2 people unless a single family group is using it. **Please arrive 10-15 minutes prior to Mass.** All people older than 2 years old need to be wearing face masks. Hand sanitizer will be available for your use in the narthex at the church doors. Come up to the narthex, and a volunteer will meet you, check your names off the signup list, and then direct you to your seats. The aisles of the church are now one-way: the main aisle of the church travels from the narthex toward the front of the church, and both side aisles travel from the front of the church toward the back. **At this time, all seating is assigned by the volunteers.** This will mean that people might not be able to sit where they normally do at Mass. However, the seating system is designed so that we can efficiently use the pews while maintaining the appropriate social distancing and while allowing families to sit together in the same pew. **There can be no congregating of people within the church building** (e.g., gathering in the narthex to chat, etc.). Items in the narthex have been removed in order to prevent any sort of congregating. The holy water stoops have been removed, and votive candles are not available at this time.

Changes During Mass

No altar servers will be used during Mass, nor will Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. I will be the only one distributing Communion during Mass. Additionally, there will be no entrance procession. When Mass begins, I will exit the sacristy. At the Offertory, **there will be no procession with the gifts** of bread and wine. Additionally, **there will be no collection taken up.** Instead, there will be a **wooden collection box** attached to the back pew on the left-hand side as you enter the church; please deposit any offerings in this locked collection box as you enter. **At the Our Father, there is to be no holding of hands**, a gesture which is not prescribed by the Mass rubrics. Since it is already optional, **the Sign of Peace will be omitted.**

It is important to remember that for those attending Mass, there is no obligation to receive Communion at any particular Mass; the Sunday obligation (currently dispensed) is to attend Mass, not to receive Communion. Instead, a spiritual communion can be made. Catholics are only

obligated to receive Communion once per year during the Easter season. For those who wish to receive Communion and who are properly disposed, Communion will proceed as follows. After I have received Communion, I will sanitize my hands and then come down to the front of the sanctuary, as normal. One side of the church will come up for Communion, and then the other side (I will give directions at that time), which ensures there is only a single-file line. While coming up for Communion, social distancing must be maintained in the line. There are tape marks on the floor down the main aisle indicating where to stand so as to maintain 6 feet of distance from others in line. **The Diocese has directed that Communion can only be received in the hand at this time.** When you approach for Communion, take off your mask. **Gloves cannot be worn when receiving Communion.** When you are given Communion, step to the side, consume the Host, and then put your mask back on and return to your seat. Please wait for the communicant in front of you to move away before moving forward yourself. If there is inadvertent contact between my hand and a communicant's hand, I will temporarily stop distributing Communion, sanitize my hands, and then resume distributing Communion. Mass will conclude in the usual way, except that there will be no exit procession; I will return directly to the sacristy.

Changes After Mass

After Mass, I will not be able to greet people as I normally do. Please stay in your pew until the volunteers direct you to leave so as to maintain social distancing. During this time, we will temporarily be using the back exit of the church in order to control traffic flow (those needing the elevator may still use it to leave). The volunteers will direct you to exit through the sanctuary, through the server sacristy, and out the back door of the church. **There can be no congregating after Mass**, and please do not congregate outside after Mass. Paper bulletins cannot be distributed at this time. As has been the case throughout the suspension of public Masses, an electronic copy of the bulletin will be available on the parish website (www.stmarypecatonica.org/bulletins/). Once people have left, volunteers will sanitize the building. This includes sanitizing the pews which were in use, commonly touched items such as door handles, and the restrooms. This will help reduce the risk of contagion and ensure that the facilities are ready for the next Mass.

Changes for Confessions

At this time, confessions cannot be heard in confined spaces, which means that the normal confessional cannot be used. Instead, **confessions will be heard in the parish hall on Saturdays from 4:45-5:15 p.m.** (Tuesday morning confessions will not be available at this time). This means that **the restrooms will be unavailable during confessions.** The procedure for confession will be slightly different. A mask must be worn for confession. When it is your turn for confession, please enter the parish hall **and close the door to the hall behind you.** There will be a folding chair for you to use. Furniture will be arranged such that social distancing will be maintained during confession, and the traditional screen will be in place so as to preserve anonymity. Please speak in a low voice or whisper so as to not be overheard. **After going to confession, you cannot go to the**

church to do your penance unless you have signed up for the 5:30 p.m. Mass; if you have not signed up for Mass, you must exit the building and do your penance at home.

If you are waiting for confessions, there will be places marked in the anteroom to the parish hall for you to wait while maintaining social distancing of 6 feet. When a penitent finishes confession and leaves, please wait while the penitent's chair is sanitized (this must be done after every penitent). **Once the chair has been sanitized, the next person in line for confessions may enter.**

Changes for the Restrooms

Restrooms will be available for use, as normal, except during the time allotted for hearing confessions (Saturday afternoons from 4:45-5:15 p.m.). Access to both the men's and women's restrooms is through the parish hall (the other door for the women's restroom is not available). **Restrooms are limited to 1 person at a time, unless it is a parent and child.** For those waiting for the restroom, the floor in the parish hall is marked with 6-foot intervals in order to maintain social distancing. Please only use a chair if you absolutely need to sit while waiting.

I recognize that these changes are very different from what we are used to as a parish and as a church. However, they are necessary at this time so as to be able to provide access to Mass and the sacraments while also mitigating the risks associated with gathering for worship. There have been several articles in the news recently about people gathering for church or church-related events, only to discover that one of them was asymptomatic and infected many of those gathered. This is what these changes are trying to mitigate against. At this time, it is not known how long these changes will need to be in place, but it is reasonable to assume that it will be for a while.

I am deeply grateful to all those who volunteered to assist with the reopening of the parish – those who were on the reopening advisory and implementation committee, those who volunteered to assist with the Masses as greeters and disinfectors, and those who volunteered in any other way. This would not have been possible without your generous assistance.

I look forward to being able to see people at Mass again. Please be conscious of the risks involved in gathering for Mass, your own health (especially if you are in the vulnerable category due to age and/or underlying health conditions), and the health of others. Thank you for reading this lengthy, but necessary, letter, and thank you for adhering to these requirements so that we can begin to offer public Masses again. This only will work if we work together as a parish.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Rev. Joseph F. Jaskierny, M.T.S., J.C.L.
Pastor