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Diocese of Erie announces plans for gradual return to worship

As all 13 counties of the Diocese of Erie move into the yellow phase for reopening, the Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, has announced the diocese will take a gradual approach to restoring public worship in northwest Pennsylvania.

General protocols include:

- The suspension of all public Masses remains in effect.
- The dispensation from Sunday and holy day Mass obligations remains in place.
- A dispensation from the Easter Duty of receiving the Holy Eucharist during the Easter season is granted throughout the diocese.
- Livestreaming of Masses (both daily and Sunday) will continue wherever feasible.
- Spiritual Communion will continue to be strongly encouraged.
- Regular pastoral visits to hospitals and to the home-bound remain suspended. Priests and deacons only (no lay ministers) may visit the home-bound for emergency sacramental visits.

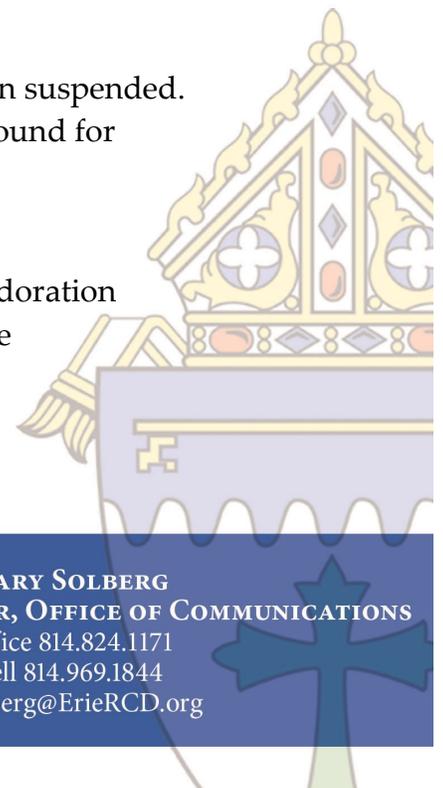
Additionally,

- Permission has been restored for pastors to schedule periods of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament as well as times for confessions, effective Sunday, May 10. Each pastor has the freedom to determine how

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and when to implement these events.

- Priests in the diocese have been asked to meet with other priests in their regions over the next two weeks to discuss preparing for possible next steps. Of immediate concern is how to make the Eucharist available to people.
- Bishop Persico will host a virtual town hall on the topic on Thursday, May 21, at 7 pm. Parishioners will be invited to sign up for the event through Zoom beginning next week, and will be able to submit questions by email for the bishop. The event will later be posted on the diocesan website.

“I know people are longing to return to Mass and, especially, to receive the Eucharist,” Bishop Persico said. “Protocols are complex, and I do not want to begin opening and then have to pull back again. It’s my intention to lift restrictions gradually so that we don’t create dangerous situations for our parishioners or our priests, and that we don’t contribute to a spike in COVID-19 cases. So, while we are able to offer adoration and confession effective May 10, we also are working on how we might be able to at least offer Communion services in the near future.”

The Priest Council, which has advised the bishop, will convene again on May 20 to continue discussing the best ways and a timeframe for moving forward.

Bishop Persico has spent the last several weeks in conversation with numerous advisors as well as reviewing the protocols and information provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the CDC.

“I know many people are expecting us to open the doors and return to life as we knew it,” Bishop Persico said. “But as much as we all are eagerly anticipating that situation, the reality is we must proceed with caution.”

He noted that the bishops of Pennsylvania first decided to suspend public Masses for the health and safety of the community on March 17, 2020.

“We also are the ones who need to oversee the steps that will be taken as we begin to restore worship,” he said.

Bishop Persico said that the counties that have been moved to the yellow phase still have considerable restrictions, and that he is committed to observing them.

Pastors have been told they must consider their own health concerns as well as the situation in their own parishes, including the configuration of their church building and their ability to meet necessary protocols. They have received guidance on protocols including social distancing, the availability of hand sanitizers, the removal of hymnals and more.

Of special note: the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions that put them at greater risk are encouraged to stay home so they do not put themselves or others at risk.

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