

RC DIOCESE OF ALBANY
LITURGICAL NOTES FOR MASSES, SACRAMENTS & LITURGIES
DURING THE SEASONS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

11/24/20

The Purpose and Aim of this Document:

The purpose of this document is to provide both parameters and guidelines/suggestions to assist parish leaders and parish communities in planning for Christmas liturgies during these difficult times of the ongoing pandemic. There are some principles that apply to every situation, but, given the myriad of local circumstances, the guidelines and ideas given below can be applied to that local situation. There are so many unknowns, of course, but a given or known is certainly the need to plan for our Christmas liturgies. This document contains the information present in the October version of “Liturgical Notes...”, as well as some further information, suggestions and updates for specific issues.

Basic Principles and Factors:

- This document has been prepared after reviewing the various governmental, medical and liturgical guidelines, as well as after consultation with the Liturgy Offices of the upstate New York dioceses.
- An assumption that the current Diocesan Liturgical Guidelines (such as the Reopening Guidelines and various updates) will still be in effect at the time of the Christmas Season. As we know well, we are dealing with a constantly evolving situation in terms of governmental regulations and medical advice, and so the parameters and guidelines may change at any time. Furthermore, as with the celebration of Holy Week and the Triduum, the USCCB or the Holy See may also issue new liturgical advice or laws.
- At the time of writing, no parts of the Diocese are under a special category of the Governor’s New York State “micro-cluster focus areas” (yellow, orange, red zones): all parts of the Diocese are currently classified as “non-cluster.” This situation could, of course, change and parish leaders will need to keep up to date with the designation of their area. Note that in an area designated to be in the yellow zone, the percentage for church occupancy remains unchanged (see next point). Note also that the Governor’s Executive Order (11/12/20) regarding a 10,00 pm curfew applies to places such as bars, gyms, restaurants and liquor stores, but not to churches/places of worship.

- A reminder and clarification regarding church seating capacities. Although the current NYS Guidelines for House of Worship (as of 10/6/20) currently allow for a 50% occupancy in non-cluster and yellow cluster areas, the same Guidelines also continue to maintain the rule of a six-foot social distancing between households. In effect, this reduces the actual capacity of a church building to a figure less than the 50 % allowed in NYS designated non-cluster or yellow zones. As mentioned in previous Diocesan Guidelines, the realistic or working capacity, given the social distancing/six-foot rule, is probably closer to 25-30% of the total seating capacity of a church building. The actual figure would depend on factors such as the layout of and style of seating in the church.
- The FDLC (the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions) has issued some useful suggestions and guidelines “A Liturgy Preparation Aid for the Seasons of Christmas and Advent.” This document can be found on the FDLC website and in the Prayer and Worship Section of the Albany Diocesan portal. A Spanish version is also available: <https://www.fdlc.org/resources>
- Any parameters or guidelines/suggestions will be following current universal liturgical law and norms, and canon law.
- The CDC has issued updated Guidelines for celebrating the holidays (issued on September 21, 2020).
- There is a particular concern regarding potential numbers at what is often called the “Vigil” Mass for Christmas on Christmas Eve, often celebrated at 4:00 pm.
- A reminder that the Missal provides for four Christmas Masses:
 - At the Vigil Mass (specified as: “on the evening of December 24, either before or after first Vespers of the Nativity”)
 - At the Mass During the Night
 - At the Mass at Dawn
 - At the Mass During the Day
- A desire to balance two, vital considerations. First, the need to ensure that parishioners will, if they so desire, be able to participate at Christmas Masses. Secondly, the Season of Christmas is also a wonderful opportunity for evangelization and welcome to those who do not participate regularly in the liturgical life of the Church. It is obviously important that we will also be able accommodate this second group of people to the best of our ability.
- The number of Masses that an individual priest might celebrate over the few days of Christmas and then the weekend also needs to be considered (also see note in the next section).

- The close proximity of the weekend this year (the Sunday being the Feast of the Holy Family) furnishes scheduling issues. However, it might also yield opportunities, given the continued suspension of the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days.
- How many will come? We all realize that there is no way to know how many people will choose to come for Christmas Masses. However, a good rule of thumb might be to determine the percentage of your current attendance compared to a pre-COVID Sunday attendance. The percentage of your normal Christmas Mass attendance should be close to a possible attendance figure.

Specific Parameters and Guidelines:

Children's Liturgies

Given the current threat of the Coronavirus as well as the necessary health and safety precautions that must be followed, it is highly recommended that **children's liturgies**, particularly pageants, **do not take place**. Not only is it difficult for children to maintain social distance and wear masks while speaking/singing, etc. both during rehearsals and at "performances," but it is also difficult to accommodate the gatherings that these liturgies tend to attract in terms of space and time.

Ushers/greeters/ambassadors and sanitizing teams etc.

Ushers will be essential with whatever system you have in place for helping check tickets, sign people in, help find seats, and respectfully turn people from the doors. Given the need to sanitize after each Mass, this will affect the schedule of Masses.

Christmas Vigil Timings:

As with the past few years, in certain and exceptional circumstances it may be possible to celebrate a Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve before 4:00 pm. **Permission must be obtained from the Bishop's Office for each case.** A recent memo from the USCCB Committee on Divine Worship (10/26/20) gives the opinion that:

"particularly in this time of pandemic, a diocesan bishop can give a broad interpretation as to what constitutes 'evening.'" In doing so, he may choose to permit Christmas Eve Masses to be celebrated earlier than 4.00 pm. However, given the common interpretation of 'evening' under normal circumstances, any permission this year because of COVID-19 might be considered exceptional."

Music Guidelines:

Diocesan Guidelines regarding singing or the use of choirs remains in force (cf. Diocesan Liturgical Guideline Updates issued on 28th September 2020). Below are given some more detailed Guidelines and rationales

The Albany Diocesan Guidelines for music are based on some key criteria; such as the importance of music in the liturgy, health/safety protocols especially given the uptick in Coronavirus cases, current governmental and medical regulations, ongoing research into matters such as aerosol dispersion of the virus. The Guidelines also take into account the diverse situations in each parish. Therefore:

1. Congregational singing is not forbidden, because it is possible to do so safely, with masks and spatial distancing. Choral singing is not forbidden, because it is possible to do so safely, with masks and spatial distancing. Parish leaders may deem it possible to resume one or the other, or both, or neither (depending on considerations such as the liturgical space etc.).
2. Given the importance of music in the liturgy and the need to maintain safety/health protocols (especially given the uptick in Coronavirus cases), Parish Leaders and Music Directors ought to discern a possible scenario in which they might accomplish either of the above safely. As noted, this will vary from church to church, taking into account the available space for ensembles, the size of the church, and the demographics of the parish or choir.
3. If a plan for choral singing, for example, is deemed to be possible and agreeable between the leadership, and choir members also feel safe to participate, then it may be prudent to implement the plan and proceed with choral singing. There should be no pressure whatsoever—and certainly no deadline—to resume either congregational singing or choral singing.
4. Directors of Music and directors of ensembles may employ additional precautions, such as temperature-taking upon arrival to rehearsal or liturgy. Choir members should be regularly encouraged to exercise prudence and stay away from the ensemble setting whenever they experience viral symptoms or are notified of close contact with someone who has tested positive for Covid-19.
5. A safe plan for singing ought always to be subject to review, easily paused should any safety concern arise.
6. Regular communication is essential. If a Pastor and Director of Music were to propose a plan to resume choral singing safely and prudently, but their choir members were not ready to return, then all parties wait until everyone feels safe to proceed.
7. If choir meetings must be paused, contingency plans are recommended so that liturgical music (as desired) may continue safely with musicians who are not involved in the ensemble (i.e. cantors who are not members of the choir).

Resource re singing and the spread of the virus: Recent UK Study, referenced in the November 2020 issue of *The American Organist*. <http://bit.ly/aerosol-droplet-study>

The Sacrament of Reconciliation:

Given that the Season of Advent is one of preparation, consideration should also be given in planning to encourage the celebration of the **Sacrament of Reconciliation**. Again, the current Diocesan Liturgical Guidelines and Updates regarding this sacrament remain in force. If the space and other factors allows, some form of communal celebration may be possible, provided that the usual requirements (masks, social distancing, sanitizing etc.) can be maintained. Some helpful ideas include:

- Revisiting possible timings for individual confessions (an expanded time, or something similar to past celebrations such as “the lights are on.”)
- To assist people in their preparations for the sacrament, have a Liturgy of the Word or some readings, along with a suggested examination of conscience on the parish website, or recording these.
- If the logistics of the church premises permit (such as maintaining social distancing, suitable places for confessors and those celebrating the sacrament etc.) and enough confessors can safely be accommodated, a celebration of a communal Reconciliation Service with individual confessions is permitted.
- Sample services can be found in the Rite of Penance, Appendix II: Advent, or in the FDLC document, page 8 ff.

The Number of Masses to be celebrated by an individual priest.

Acknowledging the exceptional situation in which we find ourselves this year and where, in the judgment of the priest, there is a serious pastoral need, the Bishop gives a general permission for a priest to celebrate up to 4 Masses on Christmas Eve and up to 4 Masses on Christmas Day. (Cf. CIC, Canon 905, 2; and the indult of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Indult Letter to the USCCB, 20th November 2020).

The Domestic Church.

As during the time of the lockdown, many people will visit the parish website or other forms of communication. Make sure that a good variety of resources are available that include information about Christmas liturgies, catechetical and prayer resources or links to useful websites/resources etc. A number of helpful ideas are provided in the FDLC document (page 5 following).

Suggestions and Ideas:

These are based on input from various parishes leaders in the Diocese (thank you for sharing your best practices and ideas!)

Use the many ways available to communicate with your parishioners about Christmas Mass arrangements (times, use of tickets/reservations etc.). Examples include:

- Phone tree system,
- Flocknote (this has a sign up function),
- Website
- Apps,
- Christmas letter
- Advertising in the local media
- A clear voicemail message on the parish phone system,
- A video message on the parish website.
- Make sure that any message contains the essential information (Mass times and places, how any reservation system is to work, safety protocols (such as face masks, sanitizing etc.)
- The message and other information should also include details of the timing and availability of live-streamed or recorded Masses

Given that many people coming to Mass at Christmas may not have been to Mass since the beginning of the pandemic, an announcement would need to be made during Mass about various protocols and procedures for Holy Communion etc.

Begin the process of planning NOW and aim to be communicating with parishioners by the First Sunday of Advent.

Encourage regular Mass goers to consider attending a Mass other than the highly popular 4:00 pm (or similar time) Vigil.

Add Masses (perhaps utilizing other priests, where possible).

Use an alternative location (parish hall, arena, etc.).

Use technology to show Mass in a satellite location where people could still be able to receive Holy Communion.

Continue to use the live-streaming of Mass where possible, especially at Christmas. Given the ongoing suspension of the Sunday/Holy Day obligation to go to Mass, the uptick in cases and the possibilities of evangelization and outreach, the live-streaming of Christmas Masses provides many great opportunities, even though it cannot, of course, be a substitute for attending Mass in person.

A possibility of offering other Christmas services or liturgies rather than the Mass at certain times, given that the Sunday/Holy Day obligation continues to be suspended until further notice (cf. Albany Diocesan Guidelines Update, 28th September 2020). Note that according to liturgical law, a form of communion service should not be celebrated in a church if a Mass is also being offered on the same day in that place.

Have tickets or some other form of a reservation system for all or for “high demand” Masses. Consider this for Christmas, especially if you are not using the ticket or reservation system at present. There are many ways to employ this system...

Decide on the best way to make tickets/reservations available to parishioners

Decide on the best way to make tickets/reservations available to those who do not regularly come to Mass

Decide on the best way to make tickets/reservations available taking into account parish office and staff resources and online/computer resources

Possibilities: Distributing tickets during Masses starting the first Sunday of Advent

Website or Flocknote sign up (there are also various free apps available such as Yapsody.com)

Phone in system for sign up

Keeping a reserve of tickets/reservations for the Mass

Make tickets/reservations available by pew/by Mass. They will be pew specific and will be clustered (you can get a ticket for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.) The locations would be plotted out beforehand using a seating plan of the church.

Finally, we are dealing with an exceptional situation. Just as little this year has been “normal”, so too with our Christmas celebrations. We will just try and do our best through reflection, planning and preparation. Deepest thanks for all that you have done and all that you are doing!