



*O Mary,*  
YOU SHINE  
CONTINUOUSLY ON  
OUR JOURNEY AS A  
SIGN OF SALVATION  
AND HOPE. WE ENTRUST  
OURSELVES TO YOU,  
*Health of the Sick.*  
DO NOT DESPISE OUR PLEAS—  
WE WHO ARE PUT TO THE TEST—  
AND DELIVER US FROM EVERY DANGER,  
*O glorious and blessed Virgin.*

*-Excerpt from Pope Francis' Prayer to Our Lady, Health of the Sick*

# **Guidance for the Safe Reopening of Parish Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Programs (July 2020)**

## **Introduction**

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, the Diocese issued [\*The Safe Re-Opening of Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Programs: Preliminary Operational Considerations\*](#) which outlined initial guidance for the safe reopening of the spaces used by parish faith formation/youth ministry programs. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, the Diocese issued [\*Forming Faith in COVID-19 & Beyond: A Resource Guide for Parishes\*](#) which considered more the programmatic approaches, resources, and models that might be used to provide faith formation/youth ministry as we continue to face the challenge of COVID-19.

Now, having received and reviewed the [\*Reopening Guidance\*](#) for schools provided by New York State, we offer the following guidance which essentially builds upon the initial guidance of June 10<sup>th</sup>. This diocesan guidance draws upon the principles articulated in the New York State guidance with appropriate adaptations for the unique realities of faith formation/youth ministry programs. Each parish is expected to adhere to the requirements of this diocesan guidance no matter the configuration of its facilities, or the size of its faith formation/youth ministry programs. How each parish implements the requirements will, of course, differ according to its unique community.

It is the expectation that all faith formation/youth ministry programs resume, in some format, for the 2020-2021 catechetical year. Programs need not start in September. A later start (such as October) allows more time for preparation and for families to adjust to the new academic year. Currently parishes are planning to use one of three models: in-person, hybrid, or virtual/at home.

- In-person faith formation/youth ministry programs are permitted, provided that the following guidance can be fully implemented and carefully observed. Provision must be made for families who are hesitant to return. Programs should also be flexible and nimble enough to move to a virtual/at-home format if another shutdown occurs.
- A hybrid program offers occasional gathered sessions or events at the parish combined with virtual/online opportunities or other home-based activities. Please note: when sessions or events are held at the parish, the expectation is that the following guidance will be fully implemented and carefully observed.
- Entirely virtual/online or other non-gathered models should not be discounted. They can be an effective means for families to grow in faith together according to their unique needs and schedules, yet still under the pastoral guidance of the parish.

Extensive information on models for faith formation can be found in [\*Forming Faith in COVID-19 & Beyond: A Resource Guide for Parishes\*](#).

It is important to remember that families will likely be facing significant challenges due to new routines for the coming academic year. Therefore, while still offering meaningful experiences for faith formation and youth ministry, parishes should take a pastoral approach and not add yet another challenge to family life. As we have learned from the past several months, we should place an emphasis on building relationships with families and provide ways for them to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ, their connection to the parish family, and their understanding

of being the Domestic Church. Therefore, ongoing communication and pastoral outreach with families, catechists, and other program volunteers will be just as critical – if not more so - this coming catechetical year as it was at the start of the pandemic.



**Guidance Regarding Participants and Procedures**  
**in Parish Faith Formation/Youth Ministry Programs**

- “Participants” refers to any and all individuals associated with the program - children and youth - as well as others, such as catechists, aides, gatekeepers, other volunteers, etc.
- As noted in earlier communications, it is most advisable to form a **parish faith formation/youth ministry reopening team** to assist in developing parish plans based on these guidelines. The team could also help to train catechists and other volunteers, as well as provide onsite support during faith formation/youth ministry sessions. Possible team members could include catechists, parents, first responders, and medical personnel. The parish Pandemic Safety Officer could serve as either a member or as a resource for the team.
- [Diocesan Safe Environment](#) protocols for the protection of children and young people remain in effect. All questions related to these protocols in light of COVID-19 should be directed to the associate director of safe environment in the Diocesan Office of Human Resources at (518) 453-6635 or [safeenv@rcda.org](mailto:safeenv@rcda.org).
- Unless changed by this COVID-19 related guidance, the [Diocesan Guidelines and Policies for Parish Catechetical Programs](#) remain in effect. Questions on this matter should be directed to the staff of the Office of Lay Ministry and Parish Faith Formation at (518) 453-6670.
- Social distancing of at least six feet is to be maintained between individuals while in the parish facilities.
- Acceptable face coverings must be worn whenever appropriate social distancing cannot be maintained. To facilitate uniform compliance, face coverings must be worn in all common areas, such as entrances/exits, lobbies, hallways, or when traveling around the parish facilities.
- Acceptable face coverings include cloth or disposable/surgical masks. A plastic face-shield alone, without a face covering, is not considered acceptable. Programs should have a supply of disposable face coverings available for those who forget them.
- Case by case accommodations should be considered for persons with disabilities, or those with physical or mental health conditions who are unable to tolerate wearing a face covering. For assistance, please contact the Diocesan Office of Lay Ministry & Parish Faith Formation (518) 453-6670 or the Diocesan Consultant for Persons with Disabilities/Deaf Liaison (518) 453-6666.
- Arrival and dismissal procedures should be modified to reduce density and facilitate proper social distancing. Consider staggering arrival or dismissal by grade levels or other assigned cohorts. Procedures should be developed to limit parents congregating at arrival or dismissal times.
- Unless it is for the safety and well-being of their child, parents should limit their presence in the building to the greatest extent possible.
- There should be no outside guests or visitors during sessions until further notice.

- The already existing requirement for maintaining accurate attendance records for children and youth found in the [Diocesan Guidelines and Policies for Parish Catechetical Programs](#) is to be carefully observed. Additional procedures for logging the attendance of catechists and other volunteers should be developed.
- Children and youth should be assigned to a cohort and remain with that cohort for the duration of the catechetical year. There should be no intermingling of cohorts.
- Cohorts, whether by grade level or other configuration, must be designed so that appropriate social distancing can be maintained in the space (“classroom”) where they meet (e.g. six feet between one other). The size of cohorts may need to be reduced from previous years to achieve this, and/or temporary space dividers used. Otherwise, face coverings will be required for all, for the entire session.
- If catechists or other volunteers are unable to maintain social distancing during a session, for example due to the configuration of the space or a particular activity, they must wear face coverings. Face coverings that are transparent at or around the mouth may be useful for younger children as well as for those who are deaf or hearing impaired.
- Based on their facilities and size of enrollment, parishes may need to alter usual schedules (e.g. offering sessions more frequently to reduce density and/or to allow cohorts to meet in a socially distanced fashion.)
- Based on the parish facilities, consideration should be given to using alternate spaces where social distancing may be easier, while still maintaining the ability to conduct the session in an effective manner. Using outdoor spaces on parish property is permissible with appropriate social distancing and with careful supervision, especially for younger children.
- Catechists should reinforce proper hand and respiratory hygiene at the beginning of each session and whenever necessary.
- Participants should be encouraged to bring hand sanitizer with them. However, hand sanitizer should be available onsite in convenient locations, especially classrooms or wherever sessions are held and in/near restrooms. Please note that the FDA has recently issued warnings about the use of certain brands of hand sanitizers that may contain lethal amounts of methanol. The link to this information can be found [here](#).
- The sharing of common objects (pens, pencils, crayons, markers, scissors, etc.) should be very limited if not entirely eliminated. Individual packets labeled for each participant should be considered. If common objects need to be used, they should be placed in a receptacle for sanitizing afterwards. Those using common objects should sanitize hands immediately after use.
- The sharing of food and beverages during faith formation/youth ministry programs should be discontinued until further notice.
- Larger assemblies (e.g. prayer services, parent/family meetings, etc.) should not be held. Virtual alternatives or individual parent/family meetings are highly recommended.
- Advise families that any child/youth who is exhibiting **any signs of illness** should stay home.

- Advise catechists and other volunteers who are exhibiting **any signs of illness** that they should stay home.
- Develop procedures for an individual (child, youth, adult) who falls ill with COVID-19 symptoms during a session. Since parish programs do not have nurses on staff to provide medical assessment, the catechetical/youth ministry leader should always err on the side of caution. The individual should be isolated away from others in a pre-determined, designated space until released to family. Children and youth should be supervised with an adult wearing appropriate PPE. Families/an individual adult should be encouraged to contact their health provider and to update the catechetical/youth ministry leader before returning to another session.
- If an individual (child, youth, adult), who has recently attended a session either screens positive for COVID-19 or is identified as being exposed to another person who tests positive, the family/individual should contact the catechetical/youth ministry leader as soon as possible. While maintaining strict confidentiality, it is the obligation of the catechetical/youth ministry leader to alert all those who may have been exposed to said individual. The catechetical/youth ministry leader should regularly apprise the diocesan Office of Lay Ministry and Parish Faith Formation of the situation.
- Allowing individuals with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 to return to sessions should follow New York State [Reopening Guidance](#) pages 40-41 as well as advice from the local health department.
- See Guidance Regarding Facilities/Physical Spaces below on cleaning and disinfecting spaces used by a person suspected or confirmed to be positive for COVID-19.
- Prior to every in-person catechetical session, the catechetical/youth ministry leader(s), catechists, and all other volunteers must complete a health screening, either in an online or paper format. (See Appendix A.)
- Prior to every in-person catechetical session, parents must complete a health screening for each child/youth attending, either in an online or paper format. (See Appendix B.)
- Per New York State Department of Health, it is permissible to maintain a record of who was screened, the date, and they were cleared or not cleared. These records should be retained until further notice.
- Parish faith formation/youth ministry programs should remain attentive to developments within the local school district(s) from which they draw children and youth, especially if a district moves to close due to COVID-19. Parishes should consult with staff of the Diocesan Office of Lay Ministry & Parish Faith Formation or the Vicar for Catholic Faith Formation and Education before closing programs.
- Parish programs should cooperate with the local health department as needed, especially in the event of contact tracing.
- Timely and frequent communication with families regarding the overall 2020 -2021 program - and especially any changes and requirements for onsite sessions (health screening, face coverings - etc.) - is strongly advised. Planning for appropriate ways to address non-compliance with requirements during onsite sessions is also recommended.

**Guidance Regarding Facilities/Physical Spaces Used  
for Parish Faith Formation/Youth Ministry Programs**

- Evaluate the capacity of **all spaces** (including “classrooms”) used during faith formation/youth ministry sessions to support social distancing of at least six feet between individuals. As noted above, adjustments in class sizes, locations, use of temporary space dividers, schedules, etc. may be necessary to achieve this requirement.
- Any reconfiguration of space or the use of any sort of space dividers should be evaluated in light of egress in case of emergency.
- Consider issues of ventilation when evaluating spaces used for faith formation/youth ministry sessions. Using spaces that have windows for natural air flow is always best. Doors to “classrooms” could remain open. Consult with the pastor, parish life coordinator, administrator, or other appropriate staff regarding the natural or mechanical ventilation system currently used in spaces occupied by faith formation/youth ministry programs. Parents may have concerns or questions in this regard. See New York State [Reopening Guidance](#) page 53 for further information on ventilation.
- Faith formation/youth ministry programs that usually share space with a parish or regional Catholic school *may* need to use alternative space for the coming year due to New York State COVID-19 protocols mandated for schools. Pastors, principals, and catechetical/youth ministry leaders should discuss this issue as soon as possible.
- Post appropriate signage about hygiene, social distancing, and so forth in spaces such as entrances/exits, in or near restrooms, in or near classrooms, etc. Signage from the CDC can be found [here](#).
- Wherever possible, reduce bi-directional foot traffic using tape or signs with arrows. If facilities allow, use one entrance for arrival, and another for dismissal. Hallways should also be divided with tape and directional arrows used to reduce density and allow for distance on either side.
- 6-foot distance markers should be placed on floors, especially in commonly used areas, areas where lines are formed or places where people may congregate (foyers/lobbies, classrooms, restrooms, hallways and so forth. (This would be similar to what is currently seen in public places such as grocery stores, pharmacies, etc.)
- Develop procedures for regular cleaning and disinfection of facilities with special attention to areas used by many individuals (such as restrooms) and for frequently touched surfaces, such as desks, tables, chairs, etc. See [CDC guidelines on cleaning](#).
- The cleaning of areas that have been used by an individual suspected or confirmed to be positive for COVID-19, should follow pages 38-39 New York State [Reopening Guidance](#).
- Restrooms should be evaluated for the capability to maintain social distance within them. Depending on the facilities, possible solutions could include: limiting use of restroom to one person at a time, installing temporary dividers where needed (e.g. between sinks), allowing use of only the enclosed stalls in men’s rooms.
- Consider closing drinking fountains.

## Conclusion

It is important to recognize that each one of us has somehow been changed – whether we realize it or not - during these months of living through the pandemic. Some of that change has been positive. At the same time, we have all also been changed in ways that have challenged us and induced various levels of stress and anxiety. The point is this: the catechists, volunteers, families, children, and young people coming back to our programs are not really the same people who left this past March.

It is incumbent upon us, then, to acknowledge this fact and to find ways to take the “spiritual temperature” and assess the “spiritual health” of those with whom we will be ministering this coming catechetical year – most especially our families, catechists, and other volunteers. Just as we strive to ensure their physical safety, we should also look for ways to nurture them spiritually in light of their experiences in this time of pandemic.

For resources in this regard, we would, as a start, direct you to the excellent [series of articles](#) by Father Thomas Konopka, LCSW that provide insights managing through this extraordinary time, and also to a [series](#) by Sr. Janet Schaeffler, O.P. on living and praying with today’s challenges. More resources will be forthcoming.

A refrain we have heard over and over again these past few months is “we’re all in this together.” And another, “we are in uncharted territory.” Both were true in the beginning of the pandemic and both are even more true as we slowly step into re-opening with the virus still active. This guidance may need to be updated as we move along, so please visit the [diocesan coronavirus page](#) often for possible updates. Likewise, please do not hesitate to contact our office. As always, we are here to serve you.

Let us continue to pray for one another.

Mary, Patroness of our Diocese and Health of the Sick, pray for us!



**Statement of Affirmation**

We acknowledge that we have received, understand and will implement the requirements of, the document *Guidance for the Safe Reopening of Parish Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Programs (July 2020)*.

**Parish Name and Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature: Pastor, Parish Life Coordinator, Administrator**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature(s): Catechetical/Youth Ministry Leader(s)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

In order to serve and to support you better during these unprecedented times, we ask that you please provide the following information.

As of this date, our parish plans to offer faith formation and youth ministry programming in the following way for the 2020-2021 catechetical year:

In-person sessions at the parish.

Hybrid Sessions (some in-person at the parish and virtual/at-home)

Virtual/At-Home Sessions

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

If you wish, please note any additional description or details of program(s) for the coming catechetical year:

Please return completed Statement of Affirmation Form by September 30<sup>th</sup> to:

Office of Lay Ministry and Parish Faith Formation  
 40 North Main Avenue, Albany, NY 12203

## Appendix A

### Health Screening Checklist for Catechists and Other Volunteers

**To be completed before every onsite session and handed in to the catechetical/youth ministry leader.**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Have you recently returned from a visit to another state that lasted more than 24 hours?

Yes    No

Do you have a fever (temperature over 100.3 °F) without having taken any fever reducing medication?

Yes    No

Loss of Smell or Taste?

Yes    No

Muscle Aches?

Yes    No

Sore Throat?

Yes    No

Cough?

Yes    No

Shortness of Breath?

Yes    No

Chills?

Yes    No

Have you experienced any gastrointestinal symptoms such as Nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite?

Yes    No

Have you, or anyone you have been in close contact with been diagnosed with COVID-19, or been placed on quarantine for possible contact with COVID-19?

Yes    No

Have you been asked to self-isolate or quarantine by a medical professional or a local public health official?

Yes    No

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Health Screening Checklist for Children/Youth

**To be completed before every onsite session and handed in to catechetical/youth ministry leader.**

**Name of Parent/Guardian Completing Form:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name of Child/Youth:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Have you recently returned from a visit to another state that lasted more than 24 hours?

Yes  No

Do you have a fever (temperature over 100.3 °F) without having taken any fever reducing medication?

Yes  No

Loss of Smell or Taste?

Yes  No

Muscle Aches?

Yes  No

Sore Throat?

Yes  No

Cough?

Yes  No

Shortness of Breath?

Yes  No

Chills?

Yes  No

Have you experienced any gastrointestinal symptoms such as Nausea/vomiting, diarrhea, loss of appetite?

Yes  No

Have you, or anyone you have been in close contact with been diagnosed with COVID-19, or been placed on quarantine for possible contact with COVID-19?

Yes  No

Have you been asked to self-isolate or quarantine by a medical professional or a local public health official?

Yes  No

**Parent/Guardian Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_