



DIOCESE
OF CHARLOTTE
CHANCERY

Prot. No. VG 002/21

May 14, 2021

GENERAL EXECUTORY DECREE
for
Returning to Normal Operations

In accordance with the latest guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which no longer recommends social distancing or face coverings for those who are fully vaccinated, and North Carolina Executive Order 215 that lifts mask and social distancing requirements in most circumstances, effective immediately parishes and the faithful in the Diocese of Charlotte are to observe the following norms.

Liturgical Services:

- 1) Religious services no longer require social distancing or face coverings.
- 2) Those who remain vulnerable are advised to continue wearing face coverings or attend Mass virtually.
- 3) Masses and confessions are to return to their pre-COVID schedules beginning Pentecost Sunday (May 23, 2021).
- 4) The options of receiving Communion from the chalice and extending the Sign of Peace are to remain omitted until further notice.
- 5) The faithful retain the right to receive Communion on the tongue or in the hand.

Mass Obligation:

Beginning Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021, the general dispensation from attending Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation will be narrowed to include only those who remain vulnerable to the coronavirus. (See attached FAQ for details.)

Other:

- 1) Charities and outreach efforts remain operational.

Again, thank you for your leadership and pastoral solicitude.

Rev. Msgr. Patrick J. Winslow, J.C.L.
Vicar General and Chancellor

Return to Mass FAQs

1. When will the obligation to attend Mass be reinstated?

The general obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation in the Diocese of Charlotte will be reinstated effective Sunday, May 23, 2021. However, some exemptions will continue (see #4 below).

2. Why is the exemption from Mass ending now?

It is important that we begin returning to Mass, when and where possible, in recognition of the essential and central nature of the Eucharist in our lives.

In the challenging year since the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, we all have adapted to protect the health and well-being of everyone in our communities. Safety precautions in place at our churches, such as capacity limits and rigorous cleaning protocols, have proven effective at making in-person worship possible without undue risk of spreading the virus. And while livestreamed Masses have been a means to help us nourish our souls when we could not be physically present in church, we must remember that “virtual” worship is not the norm. God did not come to us virtually. He came to us – and continues to come to us – in the flesh. For us Catholics, unmediated contact with the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Our Lord in offering this sacrifice to God the Father is irreplaceable and essential.

3. Does this mean everyone is now obligated to go to Mass again?

No. We know there remains concern about the spread of infection and we must remain vigilant to limit its spread, particularly among those most vulnerable. With this in mind, there are particular exceptions (called “dispensations”) granted to people in certain circumstances – including those who are ill and those who care for anyone who is at risk of serious complications from COVID-19.

In reinstating the Sunday obligation, we must welcome back to Mass all Catholics who are now engaging in other activities that would present a similar or greater risk of exposure, such as eating out at restaurants, traveling, partaking in non-essential shopping, and widening one’s circle of contacts. Returning to Mass is an acknowledgement of our need and desire for the Eucharist to nourish and strengthen us.

4. Who is still exempted from attending Mass?

People who are ill or vulnerable to infection are still encouraged to stay at home and attend Mass virtually, on TV or online. If you live in the diocese (or are visiting within the diocese), you are not required to attend Mass on Sundays or holy days of obligation if:

- You are ill or your health would be significantly compromised if you were to contract a communicable illness (i.e., you have underlying conditions or are in a high-risk category).
- You exhibit flu-like symptoms.

- You have good reason to think you might be asymptomatic of a contagious illness (such as being in recent contact with someone who tested positive for a contagious illness such as COVID-19 or influenza).
- You care for the sick, homebound or infirm.
- You are pregnant, or caring for small children.
- You are 65 years of age or older (per the CDC's recommendation of high-risk individuals).
- You cannot attend Mass through no fault of your own (such as no Mass is offered, you are infirm, or you are prevented for some reason you cannot control).

If you have questions about whether these exemptions apply to you, or if you have significant anxiety about returning to Mass, please contact your pastor or your parish office.

These categories will be reviewed and revised as needed.

5. Was this decision made in consultation with healthcare experts?

Yes. We have monitored the guidelines and requirements from the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services, local health officials, and recommendations from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. All decisions regarding our practices during the pandemic have been informed and guided by experts in the medical community.

6. Are some safety precautions still in place?

Yes. The health and safety of our communities has been and remains paramount as we continue to monitor local conditions. While the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services no longer recommend social distancing or face coverings for those who are fully vaccinated, anyone who is vulnerable or not vaccinated is encouraged to continue wearing a face covering and to follow social distancing norms. In addition, congregants' reception of Holy Communion from the chalice and the Sign of Peace are to remain omitted. Each church has specific protocols adapted for its own particular circumstances, so please contact your parish office if you have questions.

7. Are there still capacity restrictions at churches in the Diocese of Charlotte?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services no longer recommend social distancing for those who are fully vaccinated. Religious services in the diocese no longer require social distancing for people who are not vulnerable to the coronavirus. Churches may maintain a section of seating with social distancing/masking protocols depending upon pastoral needs.

8. Will parishes still livestream Masses?

Parishes are encouraged to continue offering the option of a livestreamed Mass to help nourish the souls of Catholics who cannot be physically present for Mass.

Please see our [list of livestreamed Masses](#)

9. Will the general dispensation be reinstated if the pandemic worsens locally?

The diocese continues to monitor the incidence of coronavirus in North Carolina and the effectiveness of our safety protocols. We will make any adjustments necessary in order to preserve the health and wellness of everyone in our community.

10. Why are Catholics normally obligated to attend Sunday Mass?

The command to “Remember the sabbath day – keep it holy” comes to us from God’s 10 Commandments to Moses (Ex 20:8-11). The Lord’s Day was moved from Saturday in the Old Testament to Sunday by virtue of Jesus’ Resurrection on this day.

We have a moral obligation to set Sunday apart from every other day of the week to worship God in gratitude and thanksgiving. In fact, the word “Eucharist” comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.”

The most salutary way we do this is by participating at Sunday Mass. The Mass – particularly the Holy Eucharist – is the very heart and foundation of our Catholic faith. It is during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that the saving death and resurrection of Jesus are made present to us, our covenant with Our Lord is renewed, and God, in the person of Jesus Christ, comes to us and makes Himself truly present for us in His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. It is an irreplaceable gift, a foretaste of heaven itself.

We know the challenges of the Christian life are great and we need nourishment and community to successfully “run the race” (2 Tim 4:7). Gathering at Mass on Sunday to hear God’s Word and to offer our lives as spiritual worship (Rom 12:1) along with the Body and Blood of the Lord present on the altar are indispensable tools God gives us for our salvation.

Even if you meet the circumstances for being exempted (“dispensed”) from attending Sunday Mass, you can still observe the Lord’s Day. Refrain from unnecessary work and spend time in prayer on Sunday, perhaps reading the Scriptures and meditating on the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection. [Daily and Sunday Mass readings](#) are online. You can also participate in a broadcast of the Sunday Mass on television or via livestream ([list of livestreamed Masses](#)), and make an Act of Spiritual Communion.