



ARCHBISHOP'S MESSAGE

January 14, 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

May God bless you at the start of the 2022 New Year!

I am not alone in my disappointment that the start of this year finds us continuing to deal with the effects of Covid. I am proud of the work parishes, clergy, staff, volunteers and parishioners have done to make our parish churches as safe as possible so we can continue to practice our faith while following the regulations of the public health authorities. It has been a long and often difficult journey, but parishes have developed creative solutions and generous volunteers have kept our churches safe and open to all.

Now we are dealing with a more transmissible variant of the Covid virus. I encourage people to get vaccinated and to receive a booster dosage when they are able in order to prevent the worst health outcomes should we contract Covid. Many surgeries have been delayed because the hospitals do not have the staff or beds available due to the increasing number of hospitalizations. Keeping out of the hospital and being able to recover at home provides a place for someone who may need specialized care they can only receive in a hospital.

While I do not plan to restrict participation at Mass to only those who are vaccinated, unfortunately, we must make a difficult decision at this time to help curb the spread of this more transmissible variant of the virus.

Beginning Monday, January 17th, I am instructing parishes to require all who attend Mass to wear a mask. To clarify, wearing a face shield is not sufficient protection. Out of concern for the health of all who wish to attend Mass in person, masks will be required at all parish Masses and liturgies. A medical exemption does not reduce the risk to fellow parishioners. Children two years of age and under are not required to wear a mask. I leave it to the judgment of parents whether they feel comfortable bringing them to Church without one. I remind parishioners that at this time Holy Communion is to continue to be given in the hand.

I have been asked how this mandate applies to the celebrant, lectors and commentators. The Worship Safe Guidelines, produced by the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, recognized that the celebrant and those reading need to be clearly heard and wearing a mask for the entire celebration will interfere with clearly hearing the scriptures, Gospel, Homily, Eucharistic Prayer and the other parts of the Mass. Where the celebrant, lector and commentator are sufficiently distanced from the assembly (by at least 2 metres) they may remove their mask to read or

preside. Pastors should verify the degree of separation to ensure proper distancing from the people to the celebrant. When the celebrant, lector and commentator are less than 2m away from someone, such as when the celebrant is in the entrance procession and recession, when distributing Holy Communion or briefly greeting people after Mass, they must wear a mask.

Many parishes have taped or livestreamed Masses available and I am asking parishes where possible to provide an opportunity for the reception of Holy Communion outside the church after you have participated at the parish's virtual celebration. I recognize that this is not ideal. I am making this decision to safeguard the health of parishioners. Once this measure is no longer necessary, it will be rescinded. Please be reminded to recognize the difficulty in attending Mass in person, that dispensation from Sunday obligation is still in effect and has not been lifted.

At this time, I am directing parishes to postpone 'extra Masses or liturgies for special celebrations,' such as First Communion or First Reconciliation until the end of February when we will have a better idea of the current situation and risks to parishioners.

I wish to recognize that some have expressed concern that mask requirements are an infringement on our individual rights. As Catholic Christians, we do believe in the freedom of religion and the freedom of conscience. We also believe, as Jesus teaches us, that care for our neighbour is an essential part of our authentic faith. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one that many know, and its lesson is timeless. Going out of our way to help our neighbour is an expression of our Christian faith in action. No-one I know enjoys wearing a mask for an hour at a time. We see many people working on the front lines in the service industry wearing a mask for their entire workday and it is a sacrifice they make to keep customers as safe as possible. The sacrifice of wearing a mask for the duration of Mass is an act of charity and I encourage us to see this temporary mask requirement measure in this light.

One of the tragic consequences of Covid is the division it has created in families, in communities and in the Church. We all sincerely want the best outcome for everyone even when we disagree on how to achieve that end. Wearing a mask for the duration of Mass is a small sacrifice we can endure together, offering up the discomfort for the intentions of those who have asked for our prayers and in union together for an end to this difficult trial we are enduring.

May Mary Help of Christians intercede for us and may God grant you peace at the beginning of the New Year.

Sincerely in Christ,

✠ Marcel Damphousse