



Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

RE: Guidance for Parishes After Lifting of COVID-19 Restrictions

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” (1 Peter 5:10)

It brings me great joy to announce the lifting of pandemic restrictions, effective July 31, that have been present in our parishes for more than a year. We have suffered much in this time – no one could have predicted the shutting down of our churches for 8 weeks at the height of the lockdown, or the numerous restrictions placed on parishes by government protocols for the protection of our citizens in response to COVID-19. Throughout the past 16 months those guidelines and protocols were continually adapted to reflect the Government of New Brunswick’s guidance as we lived through the COVID-19 pandemic. As we move eagerly towards post-pandemic worship, we do so mindful that the same missionary desire that drove us to overcome every obstacle to bring people to an encounter with Jesus during the pandemic must guide our efforts as we invite the faithful back into our churches post-Covid.

Over the course of the pandemic the diligent work of many volunteers and leaders within our parishes has allowed the mission of the Church to continue. These efforts have kept parishioners safe as they entered our churches and limited the spread of the virus, which surely accelerated the lifting of pandemic protocols. In a time of great uncertainty when parishes were permitted to resume public worship in June 2020, after the lockdown, lay faithful and clergy stepped up to help churches open within new operational protocols. Our priests found creative ways to continue to offer sacraments and sacramentals to the faithful during the height of the pandemic. The dedication and countless hours offered by so many allowed those who were not able to be present in our churches due to a higher level of vulnerability to remain connected to the parish through virtual resources throughout the various levels of restrictions. Great effort and energy have been demonstrated by many of our parishes to continue to engage the faithful in ongoing religious formation during the pandemic. Many parishes have offered resources and catechesis on virtual platforms when physical gatherings were not possible. Tremendous gratitude is extended to these individuals, whose willingness to serve parishes and fellow parishioners is a true act of charity and witness to our Christian faith. Your service continues as we move forward with lifted restrictions.

Allow me to thank you, the faithful, who in so many ways have generously adjusted your ways of worshiping during the pandemic. This willingness to sacrifice personal comfort for the sake of the common good during this time of pandemic is truly edifying. You have used doors you would never have used, walked further than you would have in all kinds of weather, adjusted the ways in which you were accustomed to receiving Communion, and made other generous accommodations

to help others be and feel safe. Your dedication to the Church is a sign that no matter the difficulty, it is Jesus who sustains and gives life. While it has not been easy to make such accommodations, I believe the Lord will bless these sacrifices and bring goodness from this time.

Chief Public Health Officer of Canada Dr. Theresa Tam has assured us that every pandemic comes to an end¹. The world longs for the day when COVID-19 is no longer a threat. Although the Government of New Brunswick has dropped the mandatory order, COVID-19 is still a reality throughout the world. While New Brunswick's move into the "Green level" may have us breathing a sigh of relief, we must be mindful of our brothers and sisters throughout the world, many of whom are still experiencing tremendous hardship and high numbers of COVID-19 cases. As Christians, our continued prayer and support of those affected is called for in these times.

Perhaps the greatest suffering of the past year has been the need to put limitations on receiving Holy Communion. With a heavy heart and a desire to protect our faithful, a dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass was issued on March 13, 2020. Even as churches later opened up in compliance with government restrictions, this dispensation remained in place. With the joyful news that we are moving into the Green level of recovery, this dispensation is no longer necessary and will be lifted as of September 1, 2021. "Sunday, on which by apostolic tradition the paschal mystery is celebrated, is to be observed in the universal Church as the primary holyday of obligation." (Can 1246 §1) Acknowledging that the COVID-19 virus and the variants of the virus are still a reality, those who are at a heightened risk of contracting or spreading the virus may still be dispensed according to the usual norms of canon law. For those who remain unable to attend Mass through no fault of their own, possibly due to advanced age, illness, disability, or any other grave reason, "it is strongly recommended to take part in a liturgy of the Word, or to spend an appropriate time in prayer, whether personally or as a family." (Canon 1248 §2)

Throughout the pandemic, numerous practices within our parishes were adapted to comply with government protocols, while still respecting the necessary practices of the faith. As we transition into the Green level of recovery, where there are no longer any capacity restrictions, those practices which were temporarily suspended will be reintroduced as follows:

Entry – Faithful will be welcomed into church buildings without pre-registration or being asked to provide personal contact information or answer personal health or travel-related questions. Parishes are encouraged to retain hospitality ministers in an effort to welcome and build community among the faithful. Special effort should be made to encourage and welcome back those parishioners who may be returning for the first time.

Holy Water – Holy water will be made available to the faithful upon entering the church. The use of holy water and making the sign of the Cross upon entering the church is a sacramental and of spiritual benefit to the faithful. The action reflects a renewal of baptism promises, a cleansing of venial sins, as well as providing protection against evil.

Physical Distancing – As physical distancing of 2m is no longer required by the Government of New Brunswick, seating within the church can be returned to full capacity.

¹ Dr. Theresa Tam, "No pandemic doesn't have an ending" <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1823613507670>

Sanitizing – The sanitizing of seats and shared resources are no longer required. Hand sanitizing is no longer required upon entry into the church. Nevertheless, parishes may choose to have hand sanitizer available in the existing dispensers for parishioners to use at their discretion.

Masks - With the understanding that masks are no longer a requirement for indoor gatherings, parishes are encouraged to remain sensitive to those who, either due to increased vulnerability or their own personal sense of security, continue to wear masks. Parishes may choose to have a small supply of masks available as a gesture of hospitality but are not required to do so.

Shared Resources – Hymnals and other shared resources can be used to aid in participation in the liturgy. Parishes are encouraged to provide various resources to assist the faithful in their participation in the responses and prayers during Mass.

Singing – As singing resumes without restriction, the faithful are encouraged to join their voices once again as a unified body in praising God during Mass.

Holy Communion – The distribution of Holy Communion, including Communion on the tongue, is to return to the proper time during Mass. For the time being, in an abundance of caution, parishes are asked to refrain from distributing the Precious Blood to the faithful during Mass.

Extraordinary Ministers – Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion may once again assist in parishes. “The extraordinary minister of Holy Communion may administer Communion only when the Priest and Deacon are lacking, when the Priest is prevented by weakness or advanced age or some other genuine reason, or when the number of faithful coming to Communion is so great that the very celebration of Mass would be unduly prolonged. This, however, is to be understood in such a way that a brief prolongation, considering the circumstances and culture of the place, is not at all a sufficient reason.”²

Sign of Peace – At the sign of peace, parishioners are invited to extend a physical sign of peace to those near to them. The cultural practice within our diocese is to shake the hand of the other as a sign of peace. For those who may not feel comfortable with physical contact, an alternative sign of peace may be offered.

Parish Gatherings – Gatherings are now possible without restriction in number and spacing. Social gatherings in our parishes allow the faithful to engage with one another on a relational level and are especially encouraged to help foster community post-Covid.

Religious Education – As we approach a new academic year, catechism classes and sacramental preparation are to return to their regular schedule within the parish. Gathering the faithful together to pray and learn about the faith is crucial in our mission as Christians. As disciples we are called to evangelize and disciple others growing in their faith. Parishes are encouraged to take this opportunity to reach out and invite others into religious formation and prayer.

² *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 158

Livestream Masses – Many parishes have gone to great efforts to provide livestream Masses and other events throughout the pandemic. As the faithful return to Mass, viewership on these platforms will decrease. Parishes that can maintain livestreaming Sunday Mass as a tool of evangelization to reach those unable to attend are encouraged to do so. While engaging in Mass via livestream does not replace our physical presence at Mass, an online platform can be an entry point within the parish for those who have fallen away from the practice of the faith.

The lifting of pandemic restrictions eases our hearts and is a great consolation after a very difficult period. While it may be tempting to return to the way parish life was before, I encourage you to use this as an opportunity to re-evaluate your parish activities and become more intentional in your ministry. The goal of every activity in the parish must be to lead people to a real encounter with the living God. For all of its difficulties, the pandemic has demonstrated that our clergy and faithful are ready and willing to do just that. As we move joyfully into the Green level of pandemic recovery, let us give God permission to move in power in our parishes and fan into flame the gifts bestowed on our Church during this challenging time.

Mary, Health of the Sick, pray for us!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christian Riesbeck". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

✠ Christian Riesbeck, CC
Bishop of Saint John

July 26, 2021