



Pandemic Planning Guide for Parishes

March 2020



**Roman Catholic
Diocese of Fall River**

in partnership with

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Audience: Pastors, parish administrators, and other parish personnel responsible for planning for and responding to a pandemic and its recovery.

Purpose: This guide provides information and actions that parish communities can take to help slow the spread of viral-related respiratory illnesses. Use this guide to develop a new contingency plan or modify an existing emergency operations plan that reflects considerations specific to your worship setting and community.

Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and Ratio Risk Services. Ratio Risk assumes no liability arising out of the use or application of this information.

Keep Your Staff and Parishioners Healthy and Continue the Learning Process By Planning for COVID-19

This is an Evolving Situation

It cannot be emphasized enough that **the nature of this infectious disease is rapidly evolving**. Please visit the CDC website for the most up-to-date information. Designate a point person at your parish to frequently check the website for updates throughout the day: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov>

Fact or Fiction?

Accurate information is key to combating the spread of viral infections. Unfortunately, the Internet can be a breeding ground for misinformation. Be sure to stay well-informed. The Harvard Resource Center maintains a webpage that includes FAQs: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/coronavirus-resource-center>

The World Health Organization maintains a website of "Myth Busters": <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-buster>

What are the known symptoms of COVID-19?

This coronavirus causes a respiratory (lung) infection. Symptoms of this infection include:

- ▶ fever
- ▶ coughing
- ▶ shortness of breath
- ▶ in severe cases, pneumonia (infection in the lungs).

While most people recover from this infection, some infections can lead to severe disease or death. Older people and those with pre-existing medical problems seem to have a greater risk for severe disease.

What are the Treatments?

As of March 2020, the best prevention method is to avoid exposure. The public is advised to:

- ▶ Wash hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds
- ▶ Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands
- ▶ Cover coughs and sneezes
- ▶ Stay home when feeling sick
- ▶ Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces
- ▶ Avoid close contact with people who are sick

Encourage staff and students to practice good health habits and establish flexible leave and attendance policies.



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Take Action to Help Slow the Spread of Illness

Promote and reinforce the practice of **everyday preventive actions** at all times. Work closely with your local public health department and the Chancery Office before a pandemic occurs to establish a flexible contingency plan that includes actions to take during a mild, moderate, severe, very severe, or extreme pandemic. Be on the lookout for alerts issued by the Bishop's Office for additional guidance. Be prepared to take actions that are appropriate for the level of severity of the local pandemic outbreak.

The **Before**, **During**, and **After** sections of this guide offer suggested actions to help you plan for and implement these recommendations.

EVERYDAY PREVENTIVE ACTIONS

Everyone should always practice good personal health habits.



Stay home when you are sick. Stay home for at least 24 hours after you no longer have a fever or signs of a fever without the use of fever-reducing medicines.



Cover your coughs and sneezes with a tissue.



Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Use at least a 60% alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.



Clean frequently touched surfaces and objects. The EPA maintains a list of products suitable for use against COVID-19: <https://www.americanchemistry.com/Novel-Coronavirus-Fighting-Products-List.pdf>

ACTIONS RESERVED FOR A PANDEMIC

Parish administrators should be prepared to take these additional actions, if recommended by public health officials.*



Be prepared to allow your staff to stay home if someone in their house is sick.



Increase space between people as much as possible. The MDPH recommends 6 feet.**



Modify, postpone, or cancel large events.



Be prepared to initiate liturgical directives issued by the Office of Worship. The Office of Worship may recommend measures such as the suspension of the distribution of the Precious Blood.

**These additional actions may be recommended for severe, very severe, or extreme pandemics.*

*** <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/covid-19-prevention-and-treatment>*

Create a culture of health

Include blurbs in the parish bulletin to educate or remind parishioners about illness prevention.

Liturgical Considerations

General Precautions

The USCCB Secretariat for the Liturgy has worked closely with the CDC and medical advisors to provide appropriate advisories concerning the Liturgy and public health in times of health-related crises. Among the most important recommendations offered to the Bishops is advice that applies to all circumstances where the potential for the transmission of pathogens is a significant risk:

- ▶ Out of respect for their fellow worshipers, all **parishioners are encouraged to remain home at the first sign of illness.** During the time of the pandemic, even if parishes and public institutions are not closed, parishioners should be reminded of the importance of basic health measures.
- ▶ **Hand-washing is a necessary and effective means of preventing the delivery of infectious material** (e.g., nasal secretions, saliva or other body fluids that may contain viruses) from soiled hands to the mouth, nose or eyes, where it can enter the body. Cleaning one's hands with soap and water removes potentially infectious material from one's skin.

Hands should be cleaned before preparing food, eating, or touching one's face and after handling soiled material (e.g., used tissues, lavatory surfaces, and door knobs), shaking hands, coughing or sneezing, and using the toilet. Waterless alcohol-based hand gels may be used when soap is not available and hands are not visibly soiled.
- ▶ The USCCB encourages all Bishops to **convey a clear, considered, and careful response to any potential pandemic and to avoid any possibilities of panic** in the face of a potential pandemic.

The Eucharist and the Sign of Peace

In the past when the influenza virus has been at its peak, Bishops have introduced several liturgical adaptations regarding the distribution of Holy Communion and the exchange of the Sign of Peace in order to limit the spread of infection. According to the USCCB Secretariat of Divine Worship, the Diocesan Bishop should always be consulted regarding any changes or restriction of options in the celebration of Roman Catholic Liturgy.

In the event of a pandemic, the Bishop will advise parishes of the recommended course of action. Given the current predictions, priests, deacons, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should be especially reminded of the need to practice good hygiene.

Ministers of Holy Communion should be encouraged to wash their hands before Mass begins, or even to use an alcohol based anti-bacterial solution before and after distributing Holy Communion. They should instruct people who feel ill not to receive from the cup.

The Secretariat will continue to closely monitor the situation and provide the best advice possible to Diocesan Bishops and their Offices for Worship. The Secretariat likewise has stated that it appreciates whatever information Diocesan Offices for Worship are able to provide concerning local conditions as well as the pastoral responses developed by Diocesan Bishops.



Liturgical Considerations

Ensuring the Health of Our Clergy

The Diocese of Lancaster, UK published a pandemic plan in 2006 to respond to and prepare for an avian flu pandemic. In this plan, the diocese addressed concerns regarding how to maintain clergy coverage in churches and provide pastoral care among those infected with influenza. The plan noted that if all clergy attempt to run parishes and provide pastoral care among those with flu, there is a high probability that: 1.) all clergy will become sick, or 2.) the clergy (either during the incubation period or if they are asymptomatic) will infect members of their community.

The plan recommended that the Bishop may want to consider the following: in each deanery, ask for two volunteers among the priests whose sole responsibility will be the care of the sick and dying. They will have no contact with the rest of the community to avoid spreading infection. It is recommended that the two volunteers share the same house. If they become sick, then two other volunteers may replace them.

The plan also noted that Canon 1003/2 will need to be consulted in this regard because normally the sacrament of the sick is conferred by the priest who has the pastoral care of the sick person. However, the Canon Law Society states that in imminent danger of death or less pressing circumstances, another priest can anoint the sick.

Obligation to Participate in Mass

Though Canon 1247 states there is an obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the Bishop may want to consider making it clear that if the faithful are ill, suspect they are ill, or in contact with someone who is ill, they should NOT attend Mass. This is to protect their well being and the well being of the community.

Canon 1248/2 states: "If it is impossible to assist at a Eucharistic celebration, either because no sacred minister is available or for some other grave reason, the faithful are strongly recommended to take

part in a liturgy of the Word, if there be such in the parish church or some other sacred place, which is celebrated in accordance with the provisions laid down by the diocesan bishop, or to spend an appropriate time in prayer, whether personally or as a family or, as occasion presents, in a group of families."

Sacrament of Reconciliation

There is likely to be an increased demand for confession during a period of high mortality. In these circumstances, Canon Law states that it is permissible to give general absolution without prior individual confession:

961§1 "General absolution, without prior individual confession, cannot be given to a number of penitents together, unless:

1. Danger of death threatens and there is not time for the priest or priests to hear the confessions of the individual penitents;
2. There exists a grave necessity, that is, given the number of penitents, there are not enough confessors available properly to hear the individual confessions within an appropriate time, so that without fault of their own the penitents are deprived of the sacramental grace of Holy Communion for a lengthy period of time..."

If a pandemic is declared, the Bishop may want to consider advising our priests to give general absolution at the first opportunity. If during the first wave of the pandemic members of our community request individual confession, we may consider it advisable to direct our priests to dispense with the confessional box – due to physical proximity in an enclosed space – and hear confession with enough space between the confessor and penitent to reduce the risk of infection while at the same time ensuring privacy.

The enclosed space within confessional boxes is best avoided, unless the confessionals are well disinfected (cleaning the veil or grille in particular) on a regular basis.

Maintaining Operations

Offertory Considerations

In the event of widespread illness, large numbers of parishioners may opt to forego Mass to avoid crowds, or the department of health may advise that large gatherings, including liturgical celebrations, be canceled. A parish's offertory collection could be adversely effected, making it more challenging to maintain operations.

Pastors may want to speak to parishioners about this possibility, and encourage parishioners to enroll in an electronic donation system if they have not already done so. For more information about electronic donation systems, please contact:

Miriam Finn Sherman, Chief Executive Officer
The Catholic Foundation of Southeastern
Massachusetts
Tel: 508-985-6510
Email: msherman@catholicfoundationsema.org

Offertory Safety

Please be mindful of adhering to **offertory collection guidelines** during this time. It is possible that your regular counters will be absent due to illness. If you appoint new counters, make certain they are properly trained and can demonstrate an understanding of the procedures.

Premises Safety and Security

If a large number of parishioners do opt to stay home, there will be less "eyes and ears" to notice if things are amiss. Unoccupied parish buildings may be targeted for theft or vandalism. Be sure to increase security during this time. Make certain exterior lights are functioning. Have maintenance personnel take regular walks around the property, looking for signs of forced entry or loitering. Ask local police to increase patrols of your parish grounds.

Plan for Staff/Volunteer Absences

Staff may need to stay home when they are sick, caring for a sick household member, or caring for their children in the event of school dismissals. Identify critical job functions and positions, such as building and grounds maintenance, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training staff or utilizing volunteers.

Building Maintenance

Maintain the heat! If a building is unoccupied, do not make the mistake of failing to keep the building heated. Maintain a temperature of at least 55 degrees Fahrenheit. However, if there is a cold spell, please be certain to maintain a temperature of 68 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent frozen pipes.

Faith Formation

Faith formation and sacramental preparation classes may need to be put on hold during a pandemic. Contact the Office of Faith Formation regarding online learning resources that may be utilized until classes can resume.

Ensure Supply Chains

A pandemic situation may put a strain on the supply chain. As a result, critical supplies that your parish relies upon may not be delivered. Plan ahead by meeting with your vendors to ascertain if they have contingency plans in place – do they have backup suppliers who will deliver the product to you? Do you need to find back up yourself? Does your parish have the capacity to stockpile supplies?

Diocesan Resources

Pandemic Planning Team

In order to best utilize the resources of the various Diocesan offices that serve the parishes and schools, a **Diocesan Pandemic Planning Team** has been established and is lead by Bishop da Cunha's senior staff. This team consists of individuals representing several departments and offices, in addition to members whose expertise is relevant to pandemic planning. This team will work with local, state and federal agencies and health care facilities, such as the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and area hospitals, to anticipate planning and response needs, maintain and disseminate up-to-date information, and provide assistance and guidance in the event of a pandemic.

The team consists of representatives from the following areas:

- Faith Formation
- Risk Management
- General Counsel
- Catholic Schools Office
- Human Resources
- Communications
- Social Services
- Healthcare professional with extensive clinical experience

The team provides parishes with access to many resources, including the following:

Centralized Communication

The Director of Communications may be utilized to handle media inquiries and press releases for situations that may arise at a parish due to a pandemic situation.

John Kearns

Tel: 508-985-6512

Email: JKEARNS@DIOC-FR.ORG

Human Resources

Our Human Resource Department can aid a parish in revising sick leave policy for staff and helping with any other human resource questions that may arise.

Peter Powers

Tel: 508-985-6507

Email: PPOWERS@DIOC-FR.ORG

Office of Faith Formation

The Office of Faith Formation can issue guidance on faith formation classes, sacramental preparation, and liturgical celebrations.

Claire McManus

Tel: 508-658-9088

Email: CMCMANUS@DIOC-FR.ORG

Office of the General Counsel

Our General Counsel is ready to assist with any legal questions or issues. Please do not hesitate to reach out.

Michael Carroll, Esq., General Counsel

Tel: 508-617-5307

Email: MCARROLL@DIOC-FR.ORG

Massachusetts Catholic Self Insurance Group (MCSIG)

The MCSIG provides workers' compensation coverage and risk management services to our parishes, schools and institutions. We will be posting updates on the MCSIG website. Please go to:

<https://masscatholic.org/fall-river/>

Before a Pandemic Occurs: Plan

A pandemic can last for several months. Early in a severe pandemic, public health officials may recommend temporary suspension of certain operations, such as faith formation classes, to reduce the spread of illness before many staff, volunteers and students get sick.

Establishing a relationship with your local public health department, updating your emergency operations plan to include NPIs, and practicing the plan, can help protect the health of staff and parishioners.

Create or update your emergency plan

- ✓ **Meet with your safety committee team or parish council to update your emergency operations plan**, or reach out to the Office of Risk Management for assistance. Review all aspects of your parish operations, such as personnel, systems, services, and other resources. Make preparations for the key prevention strategies outlined in this guide. Develop or update your plan based on various scenarios your parish may face during a pandemic.
- ✓ **Establish relationships with key community partners and stakeholders.** When forming key relationships, include the local public health department, local hospitals, local businesses, and community leaders. Collaborate and coordinate with them on broader planning efforts. Clearly define each partner's role, responsibilities, and decision-making authority. Review the pandemic plan for your community and participate in community-wide emergency preparedness activities.

Address Key Prevention Strategies

- ✓ **Promote the daily practice of everyday preventive actions at all times** (see Page 3). Use health messages and materials developed by credible public health sources, such as your local public health department or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

- ✓ **Provide illness prevention supplies.** Have supplies on hand, such as soap, hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, tissues, trash baskets, and disposable facemasks for those who are infected. Plan to have extra supplies on hand during a pandemic.

Note: Keep hand sanitizers out of reach of small children. Use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers has raised concerns about eye contamination, skin reactions, alcohol poisoning, and flammability. Small children should only use hand sanitizers under adult supervision.

- ✓ **Plan for staff and volunteer absences.** Develop flexible pandemic attendance and sick-leave policies for staff. Staff may need to stay home when they are sick, caring for a sick household member, or caring for their children in the event of school dismissals. Identify critical job functions and positions, and plan for alternative coverage by cross-training staff.
- ✓ **Identify space that can be used to separate sick people (if possible).** Designate a space for sick staff and parishioners who cannot leave the parish immediately. If possible, designate a nearby separate bathroom just for sick people. Develop a plan for cleaning the room daily.
- ✓ **Review your process for planning parish events.** Identify actions to take if you need to postpone or cancel events. Consider limiting access to parish premises by non-essential visitors.

Communicate

- ✓ **Identify and address potential language, cultural, and disability barriers associated with communicating pandemic information to staff and parishioners.** Learn more about reaching people of diverse languages and cultures by visiting: www.cdc.gov/healthcommunication/Audience/index.html. Learn more about communicating to staff in a crisis at: www.ready.gov/business/implementation/crisis

During a Pandemic: Take Action

- ✓ **Communicate frequently with those in your communication chain.** Update key community partners and stakeholders regularly.
- ✓ **Provide supplies and distribute health messages to staff and parishioners.** Continue to promote *everyday preventive actions* (see Page 3). Address the potential fear and anxiety that may result from rumors or misinformation.
- ✓ **Accommodate staff who are at high risk for complications.** Provide alternative work arrangements (if possible).

Take administrative action

- ✓ **Implement flexible sick-leave policies (if possible).** Continue to encourage staff to stay home if they are sick or caring for a sick household member.
- ✓ **Increase space to at least 3 feet and limit face-to-face contact between people.**
- ✓ **Postpone or cancel extracurricular activities or large events.**
- ✓ **Separate those who become sick at work from those who are well.** Send sick staff home.. immediately.

The World Health Organization maintains a “Myth-busters” webpage: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

After a Pandemic Has Ended: Follow Up

Remember, a pandemic can last for several months. When public health officials determine that a pandemic has ended, work with them to identify criteria for phasing out and ending your parish’s NPI actions.

Evaluate the effectiveness of your emergency operations and communication plans

- ✓ **Discuss and note lessons learned.** Gather feedback from staff, volunteers, parishioners, and key community partners and stakeholders to improve your plans. Identify any gaps in your plans and any needs you may have for additional resources.
- ✓ **Maintain and expand your emergency planning team.** Look for ways to expand community partnerships. Identify agencies or partners needed to help you prepare for pandemics, and make an effort to add them to your planning team.
- ✓ **Revisit your risk-assessment and risk-management plan.** Determine ways to improve planning and implementation processes.
- ✓ **Update and practice your emergency operations and communication plans every 12–18 months.** Update your plans based on lessons learned, and replace necessary supplies and equipment.

A pandemic can occur at any time, and having a plan in place is essential. Your contingency or emergency operations plan will help protect the health and safety of your staff and students, while continuing the learning process. Coordinate your planning activities with local public health officials and key community partners and stakeholders to help achieve your goals.

Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and Ratio Risk Services. Ratio assumes no liability arising out of the use or application of this information.

CONTACT LIST & ONLINE RESOURCES

Communications

Handles media inquiries and press releases for situations that may arise.

John Kearns, Director of Communications

Tel: 508-985-6512

Email: JKEARNS@DIOC-FR.ORG

Human Resources

Aids a parish in revising sick leave policy and helping with any other human resource questions that may arise.

Peter Powers, Executive Director of Human Resources and Administration

Tel: 508-985-6507

Email: PPOWERS@DIOC-FR.ORG

Office of Faith Formation

Issues guidance on faith formation classes, sacramental preparation, and liturgical celebrations.

Claire McManus, Director, Faith Formation

Tel: 508-658-9088

Email: CMCMANUS@DIOC-FR.ORG

Office of the General Counsel

Assists with questions or concerns regarding legal questions or issues.

Michael Carroll, Esq., General Counsel

Tel: 508-617-5307

Email: MCARROLL@DIOC-FR.ORG

Catholic Schools Office

Assists with questions regarding parish schools.

Steve Perla, Superintendent of School

Tel: 574-309-0386

Email: SPERLA@CATHOLICSA.ORG

Risk Management & Insurance

Assists with insurance and risk management-related issues.

Chris Borba, Risk Management/Insurance, Catholic Mutual of America

Tel: 774-526-1804

Email: CBORBA@CATHOLICMUTUAL.ORG

RESOURCES

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/index.html>

Massachusetts Department of Public Health: <https://www.mass.gov/resource/information-on-the-outbreak-of-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19>

Boston Children's Hospital: <http://www.childrenshospital.org/conditions-and-treatments/conditions/c/coronavirus>

DAILY UPDATES

Daily updates can be found on the website of Massachusetts Catholic Self Insurance Group (MCSIG):

<https://masscatholic.org/fall-river/>

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Coronavirus: Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV). A **novel coronavirus** (nCoV) is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. (Source: World Health Organization)

COVID-19: COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. This new virus and disease were unknown before the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. (Source: World Health Organization)

Epidemic: The occurrence in a community or region of cases of an illness, specific health-related behavior, or other health-related events clearly in excess of normal expectancy. The community or region and the period in which the cases occur are specified precisely. (Source: World Health Organization)

Influenza (flu): A contagious respiratory illness caused by particular strains of viruses.

Isolation: The physical separation of a person suffering from an infectious or contagious disease from others in a community.

Pandemic: A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a new disease. (Source: World Health Organization)

State of Emergency: The Governor declares a State of Emergency when he/she believes a disaster has occurred or may be imminent that is severe enough to require State aid to supplement local resources in preventing or alleviating damages, loss, hardship or suffering. This declaration authorizes the Governor to speed State agency assistance to communities in need. It enables him/her to make resources immediately available to rescue, evacuate, shelter, provide essential commodities (i.e., heating fuel, food etc.) and quell disturbances in affected localities. It may also position the State to seek federal assistance when the scope of the event exceeds the State's resources. (Source: NJ Office of Emergency Management)

Quarantine: The physical separation of healthy people who have been exposed to an infectious disease for a period of time from those who have not been exposed.

Seasonal Flu: A contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza (flu) viruses occurring every year. It affects an average of 5 to 20 percent of the U.S. population by causing mild to severe illness, and in some instances can lead to death. Most people have some immunity, and a vaccine is available. (Source: CDC)

Social Distancing: A disease prevention strategy in which a community imposes limits on social (face-to-face) interaction to reduce exposure to and transmission of a disease. These limitations could include, but are not limited to, school and work closures, cancellation of public gatherings and closure or limited mass transportation. Organizations may also want to encourage more physical space between people so that they aren't in close contact as much as possible. In the past the recommendation for the influenza virus has been three feet/ For COVID-19, however, the recommendations is six feet. (Source: Massachusetts Department of Public Health)

Vaccine: An injection, usually of an innocuous (weak or killed) form of the virus, that stimulates the production of antibodies by the immune system to help prevent or create resistance to an infection. Vaccines are usually given as a preventive measure.