

May 14th, 2020
Feast of St. Matthias, Apostle

LETTER FROM FATHER BUEHLER TO THE CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

After two long months of lockdown, stay-at-home orders, and uncertainty about so many things, many of us are more than eager for some sort of return to 'normalcy'. This could be said for our work, our travel, our family life, our access to so many things we took for granted. And this certainly could be said for a return to our communal practice of the faith.

I'm writing this letter primarily to communicate what the first cautious steps will be as we begin to regain access to what is truly an 'essential service' to society – the worship of God as a community of disciples at Mass. I'm also including in this letter a simple 'state of the parish', which will not be exhaustive but give a glimpse into what has been going on here at Good Shepherd during these difficult times.

Before we dive into all of this, however, I want to commend my gratitude to so many men, women and children who have been so good about reaching out to us, to their neighbors, and to strangers to help keep our community and society buoyed by simple words and gestures of faith. It is in times of darkness that the light of faith shines the brightest – you have been exemplary in being the light of Christ to a world that needs that gift of hope He alone offers!

Return to Public Mass

Archbishop Carlson, in conjunction with local government and health officials throughout the nine counties of the Archdiocese, has determined that beginning Monday, May 18th, we may begin to return to the public celebration of Mass.

This requires caution and many safety measures to be in place. It will not be business as usual, and we may find ourselves unhappy or disagreeing with the decisions made. Please remember: the obligation to attend Sunday Mass remains dispensed for the time being; and Mass is always a gift, never a right. I personally do not like all of the precautions, but for the sake of something bigger than myself I am willing to accept and cooperate with the guidelines given to us.

Included with this letter is a simple FAQ from the Archdiocese on many of the practices to be put in place. I encourage you to read that FAQ before proceeding with reading the rest of this letter.

We will also be posting on our parish website a video demonstrating the protocols to follow. There will also be signage around the church to help remind us of what needs to be done to both participate in Mass and protect public health.

Some particular details regarding the return to public Masses at Good Shepherd.

- 1) We are permitted to use no more than 25% of our ordinary occupancy. Based on recently obtained numbers from the fire chief, we have an occupancy limit of 181 in the church, and 112 in the cafeteria. Thus, 45 may be present in the church (including ministers), and 28 in the cafeteria, for a total of 73.
- 2) In order to enable the greatest number of people to safely attend Mass, we will be using the cafeteria for 'overflow', much as we do for Christmas Eve or Easter Sunday morning. Communion will be distributed there.
- 3) We will be returning to our ordinary weekend Mass schedule of Saturday at 4pm, and Sunday at 7am, 9am, and 11am. We are anticipating lower numbers as we initially return (we ordinarily average 105 per Mass), but may add additional Masses if the demand is sufficient. We may also have to adjust times to allow for sanitization between.
- 4) Teams of volunteers for sanitization are needed. Please call the office if willing.
- 5) To organize attendance so nobody is inadvertently turned away, we will be scheduling Mass attendance using a service called Parish Planner. Signup will be *required* for Sunday Masses. Weekday Masses will be open attendance.
- 6) The use of masks will be *mandatory* for admittance to the church. I realize that there are conflicting reports about the efficacy and use of masks, but these are the norms that allow us *and others* to feel safe to return to Mass.
 - a. If you do not have a mask, we have volunteers who will be making homemade masks available to you before entrance to church.
- 7) The livestream of all Masses will continue.
- 8) All hymnals and missalettes will be removed to make sanitization between Masses easier. A digital guide will continue to be provided for your tablets / cell phones, which can also be printed off at home before going to church. You may also use your own hand missals, such as Magnificat, the Word Among Us, or others.
- 9) In all things, please follow the directions of the priest and ushers. We are taking baby steps and will be learning on the fly, so patience and adaptability will be a must. Thank you in advance!

Again, I encourage you to read the enclosed FAQ, and refer to the parish website for additional information and instructional videos. This will be a developing process, so please check the website often or call the parish office with any questions.

How to sign up to attend Sunday Mass

We plan to use a new service called ParishPlanner.io, which will be available for implementation beginning this coming Tuesday, May 19th.

When the service is available, details will be emailed to everyone on our email distribution list (signup on our parish website or call the parish office). Details will also be placed on our website. If you do not have internet or email, please call the parish office and they will assist you in signing up.

At the time of signup, we will need your name, email, phone, preferred method of contact, number attending in your household, and Mass preference order.

Note: due to our circumstances, while we will enable everyone to attend a weekend Mass who desires to do so, we may not be able to accommodate everyone's first preference. Hence, someone who ordinarily attends Saturday may have to attend Sunday. Someone who attends 9am, may have to attend 7am. However, the software is robust enough that it should enable everyone to get their first preference some of the time... just not all the time.

On Friday, everyone will be contacted to let them know of their assigned Mass time. *Please do not try to attend a Mass time you are not assigned.* We will not turn you *away*, rather, we will turn you *towards* your assigned time. Also, we will have to assign who is seated in the church and who is in the cafeteria. We will try to make sure we rotate seating assignments.

As we progress through the coming weeks, our process for this will be streamlined and improved. Thank you for your patience as we are all learning together.

State of the Parish

Other Liturgies – Funerals, Weddings, Baptisms, Confessions

Many ordinary events in the life of our parish have had to be cancelled, postponed, or adapted. For instance, we've had many more funerals than usual during this time. Some have opted to have a simple grave-side burial with a Memorial Mass later on. Others have had a funeral parlor service, and still others have chosen to have a smaller private funeral Mass with livestreaming for other family and friends. It is painful to be separated from friends and family, and even more so during the most important times of life and death. With the new norms for public Masses, we can now hold public funerals, following the same procedures identified in the FAQ and the notes above.

Weddings, too, can now be held publicly, but again with the same restrictions for public Masses. Livestreaming is also offered.

Baptisms may also be held publicly. In the event of multiple baptisms at the same time, we will likely use multiple baptismal 'bowls'. The various liturgical implements used for a baptism will be sanitized before every use. The church, too, must be sanitized so baptisms will likely have to be scheduled later in the day on Sunday or even on a Saturday morning.

Confessions are available by appointment, always. The first weekend of public Masses, I will offer confessions *behind the screen only* on Saturday from 9a to 10a, and again from 2p to 3p. This is different from normal so that I might be present to help coordinate preparations before the 4pm Mass.

Other Liturgies – RCIA, First Holy Communion, Confirmation

Many of our parishioners have been preparing for months and years to receive the glorious sacraments of initiation. The pangs of delay are heartfelt, and we certainly wish to celebrate these sacraments as soon as we can, but given the current restrictions, we cannot do so in as grand a manner as we are accustomed.

For the men and women in the RCIA, our current plan is to initiate them into full communion with the Church in a special Pentecost Vigil Mass, which will be celebrated and livestreamed at 6pm on Saturday, May 30th.

First Holy Communion – we are exploring different options as we cannot accommodate every child and their families at once. We might celebrate multiple First Communion Masses, or we might look into a larger facility to fit everyone all at once, such as a neighboring church.

Confirmation – the same as above, in that not every young adult and their families can fit into our church at the same time even under ordinary circumstances, much less right now. We are looking into multiple Confirmation Masses or the use of a neighboring larger church.

Facilities / Technology

Our buildings are largely as they were before the quarantine – that is, they are old and in need of repair. We've largely been addressing problems as they come up (leaks, and shorts, and repairs). The large ash behind the rectory is now dead due to the emerald ash borer and will be removed soon. Also, some enterprising students and their parents installed a new walkup library and planted a couple trees at the rear of the gravel lot. They did a great job! The library is dedicated to Mrs. Barb McInnis for her long dedication to the school. The maple will eventually be dedicated as the new memorial tree for Deacon McInnis, as the leaning Bradford Pear will have to be removed as well.

Some generous parishioners have donated our new livestream camera, and Mr. Matt Collins has been working tirelessly to bring much of our church technology up to speed so that we are best equipped to address the challenges of today, and give us new opportunities for the future. The

livestream capability has already been used and appreciated by many, many people for Masses, funerals, music, Adoration, Stations of the Cross, and the Rosary.

We've also had some generous parishioners work on other landscaping projects, such as our planters and flowerbeds. If you've got a green thumb and are eager to get outside, you are welcome to call the parish office and take on some parish beautification!

Also, the old carriage house behind the St. Joseph house has recently been emptied of cans for recycling. The shed's structural integrity has diminished, and so it will have to be removed soon.

Education – Day School and PSR

I cannot say enough about how grateful I am for the heroic efforts of Mrs. Jones, Ms. Pohlmeier, and all the teachers and catechists, parents and students, to enable ongoing formation of our youth. Many of them and you have shown a willingness to embrace unfamiliar and uncomfortable technology to make these challenges into an opportunity!

This is not a knock on our public schools as we are all doing the best we can, but I think it's in these times that our parish school really shines, as we didn't just settle for review work, but continued advancing the education and formation of our students through eLearning – Zoom, Flipboard, Dojo, Google classrooms, and safe, weekly pickup and drop-offs of materials. Our smaller student-to-teacher ratio also benefitted parents and students as more hands-on, direct access was afforded. I am proud of what we've accomplished, and hopeful that we can return to school as normal when the new school year begins in August.

Other parish organizations

It seems to me that every parish organization has sought ways to stay connected and engaged, from the Knights of Columbus and Ladies Auxiliary, to the St. Vincent de Paul Society, to the Youth Group and other small faith sharing groups. Some have Zoomed, some have taken on various small projects, and all have tried to make the best of a difficult situation.

Parish staffing

We sadly said farewell to Mary Lou Watson who has served in the role of parish secretary for many years. She had been planning to retire a year ago, but generously offered to stay on for an additional year to help with the transition of pastors. Please thank her when you see her. We welcome Debbie Landry as Mary Lou's successor. She and her husband Patrick joined the parish a half a year ago, and the two of them have quickly become highly engaged parishioners. Welcome, Debbie (and her service dog, Duncan)!

Events

Sadly, we have had to postpone many events, such as the parish trivia night, 5K and picnic. We still plan to hold these events, even if in a simpler fashion. However, we will have to wait until a later phase of reopening for social events to be scheduled. We hope this will be in the late summer or fall, but only time will tell.

Finances

Thank you to all of you who have so conscientiously continued to be generous during these trying times. We are fortunate to report that our parish has been as financial stable as usual (read: challenged but ok), when so many other parishes are seeing decreases in contributions ranging from 10% to even a 90% decrease. For us, this has been accomplished through ordinary giving, as well as some generous one-time gifts. Some have given from their stimulus check, others from savings. Not everybody can give as much as usual for reasons such as job loss / diminishment or investment decline. We appreciate the willingness to give what you can – in some cases less, in others even more. Thank you.

We also applied for and received the SBA PPP, which will provide for a small ‘cushion’, but also give us the confidence to proceed forward with the upcoming school year. We do not know how this pandemic will affect our area next week, much less two months from now. Some families had to withdraw from our school for financial reasons, but most have committed to re-enrollment for the upcoming school year. But amidst all the uncertainty, the loan (which will largely be forgiven) gives us the certainty to proceed forward with financial confidence.

Conclusion

Again, my sincere gratitude to so many of you who have heroically reached out, stayed connected, engaged in service, and have supported us and one another in these challenging times. Jesus Christ tells us He is with us always; and though the Cross will always be a part of this life, as we follow Him in all aspects of life, we experience the glory of His Resurrection even in the most trying of times. Know of my prayers for you; please keep all of us at Good Shepherd in yours.

May God bless you!



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Archdiocese of St. Louis



Restart of Public Masses - Frequently Asked Questions

As we continue our efforts to protect one another from the serious effects of the coronavirus, these FAQs are offered to assist the faithful in understanding the instructions promulgated by Archbishop Robert J. Carlson. All official information is available on our website. Please continue to refer to archstl.org/coronavirus for the latest updates—including a condensed version of all directives for parishes—from the Archdiocese of St. Louis regarding COVID-19.

When can we go back to Mass like normal in our parish?

Public Masses, with appropriate social distancing for many parishes in the Archdiocese of St. Louis are set to resume on Monday, May 18, 2020. This date was chosen after discussion with government, health care professionals, and others.

But it will take time for things to “get back to normal.”

Important safety measures will be required in order to help protect congregants from infection and slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

What should we expect when we come to Mass at our parish?

First, anyone who is ill, symptomatic, or has been exposed to someone else with the coronavirus within 14 days cannot enter the church. This is in accord with national, state, and local health directives. We also ask everyone to check their temperature at home before deciding if you are coming to Mass. You can find the current symptoms of the coronavirus at the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s website www.cdc.gov.

Archbishop Carlson has instructed parishes to ensure all pews are wiped down with disinfectant; that all hymnals and missalettes are removed; and that all surfaces used frequently (restroom facilities, door handles, etc.) are sanitized before each service.

Everyone attending Mass is obligated to wear a mask or other facial covering. The only exception during Mass is when we are seated in the pew and when receiving Holy Communion.

You’ll be asked to observe social distancing – staying at least six feet from people not in your household.

You’ll find the holy water fonts are empty and that there is hand sanitizer available.

When you arrive at church, please follow the instructions provided regarding which doors to use to enter and leave, where to sit, and the six-foot distance to maintain when you receive Holy Communion. Be sure to keep at least six feet between your family and others while in the pews.

Some parishes may have to limit attendance to assure compliance with public safety guidelines.

You'll notice there will be no offertory procession, no sign of peace, and no passing of the collection basket. You can drop your donation in a stationary basket, or continue to use the online or ACH opportunities provided by your parish.

Can we receive Holy Communion?

Yes, but only the Most Precious Body and only by hand. This is in keeping with the advice of state health officials to avoid any possible contact with another person's saliva or particles exhaled from the communicants' mouth onto the ministers' fingers.

For the distribution of Holy Communion, ushers or other volunteers who are masked and gloved will ensure six-foot distancing in the Communion line. Floor markings shall be placed six feet apart in the aisles in which the congregation approaches the sanctuary for Holy Communion to facilitate proper social distancing.

Communion ministers must be masked, sanitize their hands immediately before and after distributing Holy Communion, and when at all possible, should utilize a disinfectant wipe or purificator dipped in a sanitizing solution (at least 60% ethanol or 70% isopropyl alcohol) to sanitize their fingers when incidental contact is made with the communicant.

When approaching the Communion minister, the communicant is to pull their mask or other facial covering below their chin and present one hand resting on the palm of the other. After responding "Amen," the communicant reverently places the Eucharist in his or her mouth and immediately replaces their mask or other facial covering.

And what about coffee and donuts after Mass?

Please leave Mass together as a household, wearing your masks or other facial covering and observing six feet of distance from others. Your pastor and others will not be able to greet you after Mass, and bulletins or other materials should not be distributed after Mass. And no receptions or social gathering following Mass can be held.

I'm in the choir or a lector. What should we do?

Choirs are not allowed to assemble; cantors are acceptable to lead music at mass.

Lectors and all lay ministers are obligated to wear masks and maintain the social distance of six feet as much as possible.

When should children wear masks?

Parents should determine when a child is old enough to attend Mass and can abide by the safety guidelines.

What about other celebrations, such as first Communions, Confirmations, weddings, funerals, etc.?

