



DIOCESE OF BUFFALO  
OFFICE OF WORSHIP

## Christmas and COVID 2020

*Guidelines and Suggestions for planning and celebrating Christmas in the COVID era.*

### *The Purpose and Aim of this Document*

The purpose of this document is to provide both parameters and guidelines/suggestions to assist parish leaders and parish communities in planning for Christmas liturgies during these difficult times of the ongoing pandemic.

There are some principles that apply to every situation, but, given the myriad of circumstances, the guidelines and ideas given below may need to be adapted to your local situation. There are so many unknowns, of course, but one given or known is certainly the need to plan for our Christmas liturgies.

### *Basic Principles and Factors*

- An assumption that the current Diocesan Liturgical Guidelines (such as the *Forward in Faith* and various updates) will still be in effect at the time of the Christmas Season.
- As we know well, we are dealing with a constantly evolving situation in terms of governmental regulations and medical advice, and so the parameters and guidelines may change at any time.
- Furthermore, as with the celebration of Holy Week and the Triduum, the Holy See may also issue new liturgical advice or laws.
- Congregational singing is still discouraged and the use of full choirs is still suspended. However, small ensembles (no more than 4-5 people), particularly those of the same household, could be considered with appropriate consideration given to physical distance from the altar, congregation, and members themselves.
- In general, wind and brass instruments, which require much breath, should not be used.

*Vigil Mass for Christmas on Christmas Eve*

There is a particular concern regarding potential numbers at what is often called the “Vigil” Mass for Christmas on Christmas Eve, celebrated at 4:00 pm.

The Missal provides for four Christmas Masses: At the Vigil Mass (specified as: “on the evening of December 24, either before or after first Vespers of the Nativity”); At the Mass During the Night; At the Mass at Dawn; At the Mass During the Day

There is a desire to balance two, vital considerations:

- First, the need to ensure that parishioners will, if they so desire, be able to participate at Christmas Masses.
- Secondly, the Season of Christmas is also a wonderful opportunity for evangelization and welcome to those who do not participate regularly in the liturgical life of the Church. It is obviously important that we will also be able to accommodate this second group of people to the best of our ability.

*Recognizing the extraordinary circumstances presented by the current pandemic, in certain pastoral circumstances, it may be advantageous to celebrate one Vigil Mass on Christmas Eve before 4:00 pm. Permission must be obtained from the Chancery using the “Request for Permission to Celebrate an Early Vigil Mass” form. This permission will be granted on a case-by-case basis for this year only.*

The number of Masses that an individual priest might celebrate over the few days of Christmas and then the weekend also needs to be considered.

*Dispensation from the Obligation to Attend Mass*

The dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days remains in effect, and is anticipated to remain in effect throughout the celebration of the Season of Christmas. *The dispensation has no expiration, and therefore, will remain in effect until an announcement is made otherwise.*

*How many will come?*

We all realize that there is no way to know how many people will choose to come for Christmas Masses. However, a good rule of thumb might be to determine the percentage of your current attendance compared to a pre-COVID Sunday attendance. That percentage of your normal Christmas Mass attendance should be close to a possible attendance figure.

### *Liturgies with Children*

Diocesan liturgical norms already discourage “nativity plays” for children or adults, and given the current threat of the Coronavirus as well as the necessary health and safety precautions that must be followed, it is also highly recommended that children’s liturgies do not take place. It is difficult for children to maintain social distance and it will also be difficult to accommodate the gatherings that these liturgies tend to attract in terms of space and time.

### *Ushers and Other Hospitality Ministries*

Ushers/greeters and sanitizing teams will be essential components of whatever system you put in place. They may assist in checking tickets or signing people in, helping them to find seats, and respectfully turning people away from the doors if the building is filled to capacity.

### *Suggestions and Ideas*

- Use the many ways available to communicate with your parishioners about Christmas Mass arrangements (times, use of tickets/reservations etc.). Examples include: phone tree system, Flocknote, website, Christmas letters, advertising, voicemail message on the parish phone system.
- Begin the process of planning NOW if you have not already and aim to be communicating with parishioners by the First Sunday of Advent (November 29).
- Encourage regular Mass goers to consider attending a Mass other than the highly popular 4:00 pm (or similar time) Vigil.
- Add Masses (perhaps utilizing other priests, where possible).
- Use an alternative location (parish hall, gymnasium, etc.) for a simultaneous Mass or use technology to show Mass in a satellite location where people could still be able to receive Holy Communion.
- Please note that according to liturgical law, a form of communion service should not be celebrated if Mass is also being offered on the same day in that place.

- Consider using tickets for Christmas even if you are not using a ticket or reservation system at present. Be sure to decide on the best way to make tickets/reservations available to parishioners and those who do not regularly come to Mass.
  - Possibilities:
    - Distributing tickets during Masses starting the First Sunday of Advent
    - Website/Flocknote/Phone-in/In-person sign up
    - Keeping a reserve of tickets/reservations for the Mass
    - Make tickets/reservations available by pew/by Mass
    - Cluster tickets (you can get a ticket for 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.) The locations could be plotted out beforehand using a seating plan of the church.
    - Ask people to return tickets if their plans change to make them available to others.