

Archbishop Smith in self-isolation as a coronavirus precaution

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith is staying home in self-isolation on the recommendation of his doctor, after experiencing the symptoms of a slight cold.

In a March 12 message to pastors and staff, the Archdiocese of Edmonton said the Archbishop was advised to self-isolate until he gets tested for the COVID-19, or the novel coronavirus. In the meantime, Smith was advised to cancel all his engagements until he receives the results of the test, which may take several days.

COVID-19 can cause symptoms ranging from those of mild common colds to severe illnesses. Alberta public health officials say it appears the virus is transmitted by larger droplets, like from a cough or sneeze.

The Archbishop has stressed that he doesn't feel seriously ill, but he is self-isolating as a precaution. The Archdiocese said he is eager to return to public ministry.

Smith will not celebrate the Confirmation Mass at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Edmonton on March 12 or speak as scheduled at the Western Canadian Catholic Home School Conference on March 14.

Archbishop Smith's self-isolation came just a day after he sent a memo to the Archdiocese calling for preventive measures during Mass, including keeping all holy water fonts empty, refraining from handshakes during the Sign of Peace, and not distributing the consecrated wine as part of Holy Communion.

Fears of the coronavirus have also had an impact outside of churches. Organizers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints have cancelled a March 28 conference on religious freedoms, which was expected to attract over 400 people. It was to feature speakers representing the Catholic, Jewish, Sikh and evangelical Christian faiths, and Archbishop Smith was scheduled to give the keynote address.

"We were very excited about that. But what can you say? You see COVID-19 here, so we're taking responsibility. People understand and appreciate that," said Robert Mendenhall, an organizer of the conference and the interfaith and religious freedom specialist with the LDS church in northern Alberta.

Organizers hope to reschedule the conference for the fall.

The Alberta government is asking organizers to cancel any events that have more than 250 attendees. This includes large sporting events, conferences and community events. It does not extend to places of worship, grocery stores,

airports or shopping centres.

Also, any event with more than 50 attendees, or with an expectation of international participants, should also be cancelled.

Edmonton schools remain open, although other provinces have closed schools temporarily.

As a precaution, the Edmonton Catholic School Division did cancel a planned spring break trip to Italy and Spain for 51 high school students from Austin O'Brien and St. Oscar Romero schools. More information can be found on the ECSD website.

As of March 12, there were 23 cases in Alberta and 107 cases nationwide. Public health officials say the risk in Alberta remains low. Anyone experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 is asked to stay at home and calls the Health Link 811 number.

There has been one death: a man in his 80s who was living at a North Vancouver seniors' home. The World Health Organization officially declared a COVID-19 coronavirus a pandemic. There are more than 118,000 cases worldwide and 4,000 deaths.

Among others in self-isolation are Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, after his wife tested positive for COVID-19 following a trip to the United Kingdom, and NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh, as well as other national and international politicians, and actor Tom Hanks and his wife.