

Bishops take action to help contain coronavirus threat

All masses in Alberta and the Northwest Territories will be suspended until further notice as number of cases escalate locally and around the world.

There are now 74 cases of COVID-19 confirmed in Alberta, and 407 cases in Canada after a jump of 18 cases on March 16 and 17 cases over the weekend. There are now more than 180,000 cases worldwide.

“It is now clearly a public health imperative that liturgical gatherings in excess of 250 people not take place,” Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith in [letter to the faithful](#). “The inability to gather for this worship is a cause of great suffering. Let us ... offer this moment in sacrifice to God for the sake of all who are ill from the COVID-19 virus.”

Smith has granted a dispensation to all Catholic faithful from their Sunday obligation.

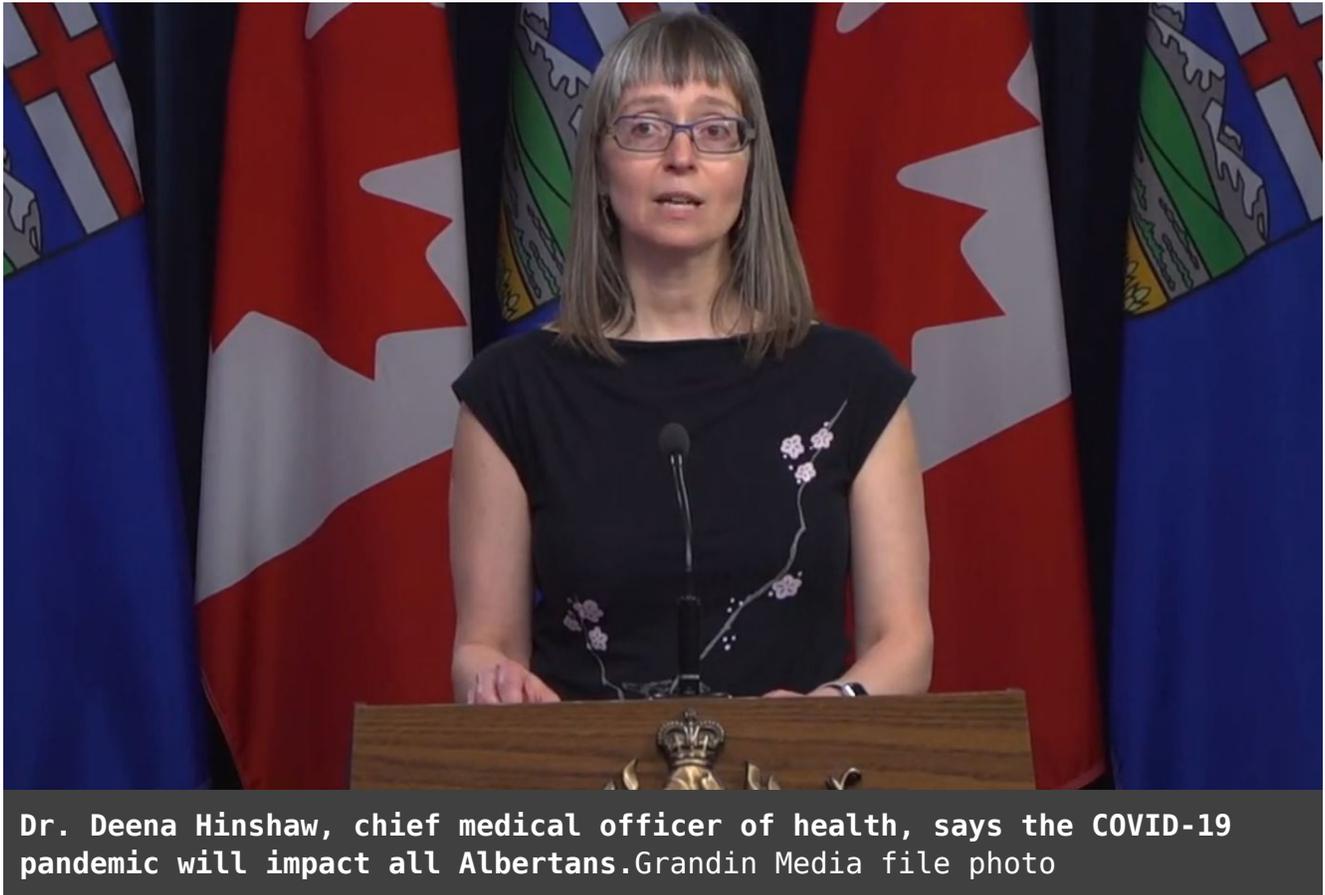
Similar measures are being announced in the dioceses of [Calgary](#), [Grouard-McLennan](#), [St. Paul](#), the [Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton](#), and [Mackenzie-Fort Smith](#), N.W.T after the bishops held a conference call March 16. Decisions around masses during Holy Week and Easter will be determined at a later date.

Initially, churches and other places of worship were exempt from COVID-19 restrictions but that was lifted on the weekend. All mass gatherings of more than 250 people have been suspended, as well as gatherings with more than 50 people if seniors, people who have recently travelled internationally, or those ill might attend.

Both Red Deer and Calgary have now declared a state of emergency allow those cities to take more aggressive measures to contain the spread of coronavirus.

“This pandemic will impact all Albertans, no matter where they reside in the province,” said Dr. Deena Hinshaw, Alberta’s chief medical officer of health who is herself in self-isolation due to mild cold symptoms.

“For the first time we have cases in every health zone in Alberta. All Albertans have to come together to do our part to help stop the spread of COVID-19.”



To ensure Catholics can still celebrate the Mass remotely, the Edmonton Archdiocese will livestream Sunday mass at 10:30 a.m. from St. Joseph's Basilica through caedm.ca. Other individual parishes may also livestream Sunday Mass, and links will be made available if they do. Catholics can also participate in daily Mass on Salt+Light TV, Vision TV, or online at dailytvmass.com/daily-tv-mass.

Churches will remain open during the day to ensure people can come for personal prayer, adoration and confession. The use of confessionals is prohibited, but reconciliation chapels may still be used to provide that distance between priest and penitent.

"Especially in this uncertain and extraordinary time, we want to offer in this way the assurance that the Church remains close to you and ready to accompany you through this or any difficulty," said Archbishop Smith, who tested negative for COVID-19 and ended a four-day quarantine.

"These will provide us with yet one more way to pray for the sick and for those who care for them."

Funerals may continue to be celebrated in churches, but families must have a limited attendance.

All Lenten missions and other parish celebrations are cancelled, but parishes

may still livestream or record presentations from their website. Priests across the archdiocese will also be available to visit with the sick or vulnerable.

“Our priests stand ready to visit persons in hospital or confined to home who request Holy Communion, Confession or the Sacrament of the Sick,” Smith said. “In every case they are expected to practise appropriate risk mitigation.”

All baptisms, First Communion, First Reconciliation and Confirmations will also be postponed until public health officials determine the COVID-19 pandemic has ended. For new Catholics, the celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation into the Church, often held at the Easter Vigil, will also be postponed. All Rite of Initiation of Christian Initiation of Adults courses are also cancelled.

These measures come after last week’s decision to empty all water fonts, and forbid the distribution of consecrated wine and handshaking during the Sign of Peace. Water fonts will remain empty and sanitizer stations will be available at all parishes.

The COVID-19 crisis has forced the postponement of [Newman Theological College’s](#) March 20-21 academic conference honoring its recently canonized patron, St. John Henry Newman. The college will be refunding all tickets. Cardinal Thomas Collins of the Archdiocese of Toronto was expected to be the keynote speaker. Collins is a former archbishop of Edmonton. The college hopes to host the conference next year.

As of March 16, seminarians residing at [St. Joseph Seminary](#) have not been sent home. However, all pastoral placements of seminarians have been cancelled.

Similar efforts to contain the COVID-19 virus are happening at other dioceses across Canada. As of March 16, Masses in the Archdiocese of Vancouver are now restricted to 50 people. The archdiocese has also cancelled its annual women’s retreat and all other lectures and seminars.

Catholic dioceses in Quebec and Nova Scotia have suspended masses, but churches can remain open for private prayer and Eucharistic adoration. In the dioceses of Ottawa and Toronto, weekend Masses and numerous Catholic events have been cancelled.