

Dioceses across Canada take first steps toward return to public Masses

It was like a new beginning for Fr. Geoffrey Young and clergy in the Diocese of Saskatoon

For the first time in more than two months, Young looked out at the pews of Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in Saskatoon on May 22 and had his gaze reciprocated, as the diocese was among the first in Canada to celebrate live public Masses since the COVID-19 lockdowns began. As Saskatchewan entered Phase 2 of its re-opening, priests took advantage of an easing of restrictions that allowed them to celebrate the liturgy with parishioners.

“It’s nice to have our families, our parishioners, the people we’ve been praying for, thinking about through these times and it’s nice that we can slowly start gathering with them and having people to look at when we’re praying,” said Young.

There’s still a long way to go to reach pre-pandemic Saskatchewan, as guidelines allow for only 10 people, including the celebrating priest, to gather for public Mass. For Young, his first Mass was celebrated on a Friday afternoon with one family.

“Ten people, you’re pretty limited. I have a family with seven kids, the parents and myself,” said Young. “When we talk about public Masses, honestly it’s by appointment and there’s some logistics to that obviously to try and give a chance for each of the parishioners to come.”

These baby steps in Saskatoon mark a start and fuel hope that churches nationwide will soon be welcoming back parishioners. Strict regulations are in place, including the need to physical distance and practise stringent sanitary measures. Even communion is affected. Young will distribute the Eucharist outside of the Mass, allowing the priest to wash his hands and don a mask, which he won’t wear during the liturgy.

“It will look a little different than it was before this happened, but generally people will be able to come for communion,” said Young.

So far, it’s areas in Canada less severely impacted by COVID-19 that are easing back towards normal.

Alberta’s Catholic bishops have approved new guidelines for the celebration of Mass, limiting the number of people in church to 50, requiring hand sanitizing, mask wearing, receiving Holy Communion only on the hand, and physical distancing to protect against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

The guidelines apply to all Roman Catholic parishes in Alberta. The earliest Mass can be celebrated is June 1. Each parish will have its own method for individuals to sign up, and only those parishes that meet all conditions will be approved to celebrate public Mass. The first Sunday Mass will be June 7.

The Archdiocese of Winnipeg allowed churches to re-open May 23-24. In a May 21 memo, Archbishop Richard Gagnon issued liturgical protocols to move from “the current private nature of our celebrations toward public ones.” Following Manitoba’s provincial guidelines, parishes could celebrate Mass with up to 25 participants “when pastors and administrators are ready.”

British Columbia has begun to celebrate Masses with a maximum of 50 people, higher than other parts of the country. In Vancouver, Archbishop J. Michael Miller has left the decision to re-open a parish “to the pastor’s prudential judgment, due to different circumstances of each parish.”

Regina and Prince Albert in Saskatchewan are also re-opening parishes. In Regina, public Masses can begin on Pentecost weekend (May 30-31), while Prince Albert, like Winnipeg, will open based on priests and parishes initiating protocols to follow guidelines.

Meantime, the Regina archdiocese has been trying to clarify some unanswered issues with provincial authorities. One topic sure to come up is an allowance so that larger parishes can welcome a greater number of worshippers.

“A lot of restaurants and bars, they’ll say 50-per-cent occupancy,” said Young.

“We’re asking for some consideration for churches. We have some very large churches that can sit 2,000 people. Ten people, you can obviously safely have more than that with distancing and all that.”

Northern dioceses will begin to open up for Pentecost. In a Facebook message May 24, Whitehorse Bishop Hector Vila announced Mass will be celebrated at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Whitehorse, Yukon, on May 30.

Things have been a little different in the Diocese of Mackenzie-Forth Smith, which encompasses the Northwest Territories, the extreme west of Nunavut and north Saskatchewan. Friendship circles of up to 10 people in private homes, 25 in outdoor settings, have been possible since May 15. Some churches have experimented with outdoor Masses, though others are awaiting church reopening, set for mid-to-late June.

In Ontario, which next to Quebec has been the province hit hardest by COVID-19, churches remain closed, though beginning on the May 24 weekend the government said drive-in services were permitted.

Other faiths have taken advantage, but Catholic churches have not.

Neil MacCarthy, director of public relations and communications with the

Archdiocese of Toronto, said drive-in services have not been part of the conversation though drive-thru confession has been discussed.

These alternative celebrations are also not being considered in London in southwest Ontario.

“The Diocese of London does not endorse these as necessary at this time or good liturgical practice,” said Bishop Ronald Fabbro. “Instead, I encourage (parishioners) to continue to take advantage of alternatives such as online Masses and prayers.”

In Quebec, society is reopening faster than Ontario, but churches have not benefitted from the easing of restrictions. The Assembly of Quebec Catholic Bishops has sent out a health-protection protocol that will evolve along with provincial health guidelines.

In eastern Canada, the four dioceses in New Brunswick will re-open parishes with strict distancing protocols and other measures for Pentecost weekend.

Other Maritime dioceses have not indicated any change from the services provided online.