

New COVID-19 guidelines allow a cantor to sing at Mass in Edmonton Archdiocese

The voice of a cantor is now permitted at Catholic Masses in the Edmonton Archdiocese, as parishes are given new guidelines following the easing of provincial COVID-19 guidelines on singing and music.

While provincial guidelines allow a choir performance with COVID restrictions, full congregation singing is not recommended at this time. In the Archdiocese, the guidelines say that only a cantor is permitted at this time. And the COVID-19 risk must be managed with physical distancing and other health precautions.

The guidelines, sent by Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith to priests on Sept. 17, include ensuring physical distancing between the cantor, ministers or congregation, and sanitizing afterwards. Cantors must wear a mask, although it may be removed for singing.

Singing will be limited to certain times during the Mass – the entrance, preparation of the altar gifts and Communion. At this time, no other parts of the Mass are allowed to be sung.

The guidelines also discourage familiar hymns to ensure the congregation isn't tempted to join in. The Archdiocese has provided priests with a list of liturgical music resources as options for parishes.

"The cantor will be singing for the whole assembly, and the people should be encouraged to interiorize the words the cantor is singing and so align their prayers to those being sung aloud by the cantor," Archbishop Smith said in the guidelines.

Roderick Bryce, the director of music at St. Joseph's Basilica, welcomes the change.

"The potential created by COVID is to press the reset button. We're actually singing the Mass as opposed to singing at Mass," said Bryce. "People are used to participating fully in Mass and people are used to singing. It would be a strange atmosphere if you hear a familiar melody and you couldn't join. That's the challenge we have with this."

Some parishes may need time to meet the conditions set for a cantor at Mass, since the guidelines were just approved this week. Additionally, the ecclesiastical guidelines for the Catholic Mass in the Edmonton Archdiocese are more stringent than the general guidelines set by the provincial government for singing and music which permit choirs and singing groups.

Nevertheless, Bryce said it's a small step forward.

"I'm hopeful but also realistic. Maybe the changes have to be suppressed again. We just need to be as flexible as we can, because the guidelines shift all the time," he said. "The last thing we want is to have an outbreak that's linked to a worshipping community."

As of Sept. 16, there are 1,483 active cases of COVID-19 in Alberta – more than half in the Edmonton zone alone. The provincial government says 41 people are being hospitalized for COVID-19, and 254 have died from the virus.