

# Ontario and Quebec churches grapple with second wave of COVID-19

Constant vigilance will be the unofficial motto for Catholic Church leadership in Quebec and Ontario for the foreseeable future as epidemiologists have declared the second wave of COVID-19 is underway in Canada's two most populous provinces.

Quebec, the hardest hit of the two, has already re-imposed stricter capacity guidelines to places of worship in Montreal, Quebec City and Chaudière-Appalaches, which are all coded as novel coronavirus red zones. From Oct. 1 until at least Oct. 28, liturgical celebrations are limited to just 25 congregants.

In Ontario, while COVID-19 numbers have skyrocketed, no similar restrictions have been placed on its three hotspots – Toronto, Peel Region to the west of the city (both within the Archdiocese of Toronto) and Ottawa.

While the pandemic curve has trended upward in Alberta, B.C. and Manitoba the past month, the COVID-19 situation remains stable for now. Other areas have not seen any significant increase.

Erika Jacinto, director of communications and media relations for the Archdiocese of Montreal, said in an e-mail that the archdiocese is pleased the provincial government recognized the essential role of the Church by sparing places of worship from the full shutdowns levied against places like cinemas.

Quebec's bishops in late September were caught by surprise when the province mandated smaller gatherings throughout Quebec. The province later changed this to the three red zones after lobbying by the bishops.

"We thanked everyone's advocacy since, in response to the appeal of Quebec's religious leaders, the public authorities recognized the specific situation of faith communities and their places of worship," said Jacinto.

"These are sacred spaces, and the celebrations that we experience therein were recognized as contributing not only to a person's spiritual health but also to the psychological health of many of our fellow citizens, therefore allowing us to stay open even within the red zones."

Churches located in yellow or orange zones still have the luxury of welcoming 250 people. But the potential for more limitations or even closures looms large throughout the province as more than 1,000 new cases were reported over several days in early October, including 1,191 on Oct. 5.

Comparing the seven-day case average that day to the figure reported on Sept. 21 paints an even more startling picture. In those two weeks, the seven-day average almost tripled from 387.4 to the 999.9 reported Oct. 5.

Despite the seven-day case average in Ontario reaching a pandemic peak of 624 on Oct. 4, the Archdioceses of Toronto and Ottawa have thus far been spared from new restrictions. Places of worship opened again in June with up to 30-per-cent capacity as long as social distancing requirements were met.

Some industries in Toronto, Ottawa and Peel have been hit with targeted restrictions. Restaurants and bars are limited to a maximum occupancy of 100 people for Ottawa and Peel, while Toronto Public Health further slashed the capacity to 75 people. Banquets, meeting halls and fitness facilities can only permit 50 people in the building at one time.

Neil MacCarthy, the Archdiocese of Toronto's director of communications, says diocesan staff stays on top of the ever-evolving situation by engaging with government representatives and health authorities for the nearly 20 municipalities it serves.

While bracing for the unpredictability of the coming days or weeks, MacCarthy is pleased with how parishes have operated in the new normal to this point.

"People are sanitizing on their way into church, they're physically distanced, wearing masks, not shaking hands for the sign of peace and there is no congregational singing," he said.

"Obviously, we'll have to look at whatever directives or proposals the government makes, but we are feeling confident about what has been put in place to keep people safe. Parishioners have told me that other than their home, the church is where they feel safest."

The archdiocese is currently conducting an online survey of parishioners to gather feedback about the first several months of the reopening and the road ahead.

Robert Du Broy, communications director in Ottawa, said via e-mail that no self-imposed restrictions are required at this juncture because "we have not observed a slackening in diligence regarding the protocols." The only voluntary closure the archdiocese would make is if a local outbreak is traced to one of its parishes.

"Even then, the parish would be shut down only to be thoroughly sanitized, the pastor and volunteers tested and for its protocols to be reviewed," wrote Du Broy.