

# Public Masses cancelled in Toronto and Peel Region amid rising COVID cases

The Archdiocese of Toronto has temporarily cancelled public Masses in Toronto and Peel Region in the wake of new restrictions announced Nov. 20 by the Ontario government to combat the rising numbers of COVID-19 cases in those areas.

Under the new provincial rules, churches in the “lockdown” zone must restrict attendance inside to 10 people. That number includes priests and support staff, which led to the directive from the archdiocese to cancel the Masses.

“I am deeply disappointed that, in some regions of the archdiocese, we must restrict participation in the sacraments,” Cardinal Thomas Collins said in a statement.

“This will inflict a great spiritual pain upon those who safely and with great dedication have been drawing spiritual strength to sustain them, and to help them to serve those suffering in this pandemic. As we have demonstrated our ability to safely worship together, I trust that we will soon be able fully to resume public worship.”

The measures are effective as of Nov. 23, which means services are not impacted for Nov. 22 Sunday Masses. The rules stay in place for 28 days, though they can be reviewed before then.

The new government measures overtake an initiative by the Archdiocese of Toronto earlier last week, when it instructed its pastors in Toronto, Peel and York regions to limit the number in churches to a maximum of 50 with physical distancing beginning Nov. 24.

That was to replace the previous rule of 30 per cent capacity in churches with physical distancing. York Region churches will now continue under the 30 per cent rule.

Collins encouraged pastors to keep churches open whenever possible for private prayer and for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Weddings, funerals and baptisms will be restricted to 10 persons.

The cardinal also urged parishioners to view livestreamed and televised Masses. He will continue to celebrate a livestreamed Mass each morning at St. Michael’s Cathedral Basilica at 7:30 a.m.

Collins praised first responders and frontline workers in the pandemic fight, and the “heroic” work that has been done in to keep churches safe.

“Now is the time to go ever deeper in prayer, and with continued love and creative zeal, build up our community of faith and reach out even more to those who are suffering in these difficult days,” he said.

The restrictions on places of worship is one of many new restrictions put in place by the Ontario government. “The situation is extremely serious and further action is required to avoid the worst case scenario,” Ontario Premier Doug Ford said at a press conference announcing the “lockdown” measures.

Under the new rules, schools will remain open, but there will be no organized public events indoors, and outdoor gatherings are limited to 10 people. Retail stores will be open for curbside pick-up only and restaurants and bars will have no indoor or outdoor dining. Essential retailers such as supermarkets and pharmacies will stay open with a 50 per cent capacity.’

Meanwhile, Alberta reported 1,584 cases on Nov. 22 – a daily record for the fourth consecutive day – and there is growing pressure for more restrictions. The province has 12,195 active cases with 319 people in hospital, 60 of them in intensive care, and 471 deaths.

In British Columbia, the provincial government announced Nov. 19 that all churches would be closed to public worship until Dec. 7.

Vancouver Archbishop J. Michael Miller said the archdiocese remains committed to doing its part to “help stem the tide of the pandemic” by following the orders.

“I am saddened that the celebration of Mass with a congregation, a comfort and strength to so many, has to be suspended at this time,” he said.

“Most of our parishes are already livestreaming Mass, and I encourage the faithful to participate in this way.”

He added churches will remain open for private prayer and individual confession. Funerals, weddings, and baptisms can be celebrated too, according to government orders, as long as they include no more than 10 participants (including the officiant) and do not involve a reception.

All this comes just as *The B.C. Catholic* released a study of the pandemic’s effects on sacraments and parish finances. The archbishop’s office has estimated an average of 17,700 people a week were attending Mass at local B.C. parishes on weekends in October, which is a nearly 80 per cent drop from the number of Catholics at Sunday Masses at the same time last year.

Sunday offerings are also down in 2020. Archdiocesan finance director Sean O’Brien is forecasting a 20-25 per cent decrease in weekly giving by the end of the year.

*-With files from Grandin Media and The B.C. Catholic*