

# Small groups, many conditions, but public Mass is coming back to Alberta

Public Mass is back, but with restrictions.

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.

"I'm really looking forward to this," Edmonton Archbishop Smith said in an interview. "It's going to be complicated. The guidelines are rather strict and stringent. But the bottom line is after two months of not being able to come to have some public celebration Mass, we can do so. For me, that can't be anything but exciting after this two-month fast, if you will, from receiving the actual body of the Lord.

"This has been a great heartache for all of us, for me, for our priests and for ourselves," the Archbishop Smith said in a video message to the faithful. "After all, the Eucharist is the heart and lifeblood of our Catholic way of life. To be part from it is painful beyond words."

"I want to emphasize that this announcement does not mean a return to normal, far from it."



Archbishop Richard Smith

Archbishop Smith also issued a letter to the faithful outlining the guidelines.

The guidelines were set by a task force chaired by Archbishop Smith and Calgary Bishop William McGrattan, and they come as the Alberta government and public health officials ease restrictions on businesses and social distancing in a phased relaunch to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Similar guidelines were developed for Alberta's Ukrainian Catholic parishes, governed by the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton. Reinstatement for Ukrainian Catholic parishes will begin on May 31, Pentecost Sunday.

The Alberta guidelines are similar to those set by other dioceses, including the Archdiocese of Vancouver, which allowed the reopening of some churches for public masses on the May 23-24 weekend.

As of May 25, 19 new cases have been reported for a total of 762 active cases of COVID-10 in Alberta. Over 5,900 people have recovered, and 138 people have died from COVID-19.

Under guidelines, there can only be 50 people in the church for Mass including the priest, Eucharistic minister, ushers and volunteers. It means that the actual number of congregants is less than 50.

Seating will be arranged to keep the required two-metre distance between each person.

Congregants will be encouraged to wear a mask, and to sanitize their hands upon entering and leaving the church. Each individual will also be asked health and travel questions for screening and for contact information so they can be called in the event of exposure to the coronavirus.

"It's entirely for the sake of their own safety," Smith said.

The information will be kept for two weeks – the incubation period for COVID-19 – and won't be shared beyond the church and public health officials in the event of an outbreak.

Individuals will be required to wear a mask as they approach for Holy Communion, which will be limited to reception in the hand only. It's a sensitive issue for some, since Catholics have a right to receive Communion on the tongue, but Smith said it's a necessary step to protect public health.

"We're asking people to be very, very patient and understanding of this," Smith said.

There will be no distribution of the Precious Blood, the consecrated communion wine, from the chalice.

In addition, there will be no music or singing at Mass. That has been

identified by public health experts as a way for COVID-19, a respiratory virus, to spread beyond the two-metre limit. There will be no procession of the gifts, or passing of the collection basket.

Each individual church will have its own sign-up procedure, and only churches that meet all the conditions will be allowed to have public Mass, so congregants are asked to check with their local parish.

“The bishops are saying to any pastor: Until you are able to meet these conditions fully, you may not begin to have public celebration of Mass,” Archbishop Smith said. “Some parishes may take longer than others to get this in place.”

Archbishop Smith cautioned against signing up for Mass outside the home parish. He noted it will be challenging enough for churches to accommodate their own parishioners, given temporary layoffs due to reduced donations.

Smith appealed for volunteers to help parishes with registration, Mass and cleaning afterwards.

“It remains to be seen how that’s all going to work out. This is going to probably be messy for a little while,” Smith said. “It will be patchwork. I think everybody recognizes that, and bishops across the province recognize that. It will be a patchwork also in the sense of timing.”

Asked if the conditions make Mass a privilege, Archbishop Smith said in a sense it has always been one.

“It’s always a blessing to come to Mass regardless of the numbers, because the Eucharist is God’s gift to us,” Smith said. “It will be wonderful, obviously, to be present in the church with others. But this is not the only way that people are able to access the Eucharist.

“We’re making sure that through livestream technology and by recalling the Church’s own tradition of the ability to make an act of spiritual communion, the grace of the sacrament is not excluded to those who are unable to be here for whatever reason.”

The guidelines for public Mass are in line with Stage 1 of the province’s relaunch strategy. They will be reviewed with public health experts, depending on Alberta’s entry into the next phase or if there is another wave of COVID-19 cases. Stage 2, which will see further business openings and relaxation of public gathering limits, is expected no earlier than June 19.

“We all have to be very, very attuned to the fact that a second wave is possible if we’re not careful,” Archbishop Smith said. “We all have to be on

guard. The resumption of Mass at this point in time is not a return to normal. It's very, very far from it."



Sunday Mass, with Archbishop Richard Smith as the celebrant, will continue to be livestreamed from St. Joseph's Basilica.

The dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass will continue for the time being. Livestreamed masses, including Archbishop Smith's virtual Mass from St. Joseph's Basilica, will continue.

Individuals are asked to contact their local parish for confession times or an appointment.

As a next step, each Alberta diocese will examine the other sacraments of First Communion, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Confirmations and weddings and to offer guidelines to the local parish.

Alberta's bishops say the past two months have been both difficult and challenging.

"I think the most difficult challenge though has been being separated from our people," Archbishop Smith said. "A priest, bishop, we're ordained to be shepherds, to be with people, to love them to care for them, to hear their needs, guide them and, above all, to celebrate the Mass with them."

"For example, on Easter Sunday, preaching at a camera, behind which is an empty church, that just speaks so powerfully to the abnormality of the situation. It

seems clear to me, on the basis of what I'm observing and hearing that it will be quite a while yet before we're back to full churches. I want that to happen as soon as anybody wants that to happen. I just miss being with the people, being able to celebrate fully, worthily, joyfully, the way we're accustomed to."

Even under these guidelines, the suspension of public Mass for the past two months has caused a drop in donations and forced layoffs of church staff and even threatened the viability of some parishes in the Archdiocese of Edmonton.

"It remains a rather worrying situation, I'd have to say, to be honest," Archbishop Smith said.

While many face economic challenges, he appealed to the faithful to give what they can.

"Don't forget that is their spiritual home. Bills have to get paid, obviously, and the mission of the church must continue. It's important right now that we keep the information before people's eyes, and realize that these are really, really worrisome times right now."