

Coronavirus Protocols for the Diocese of San Angelo

March 17, 2020

Upon the recommendation of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in order to slow the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the following protocols from Bishop Michael J. Sis are effective immediately in the Catholic Diocese of San Angelo.

Scientific evidence shows that the death rate of a pandemic can be greatly reduced by early interventions before the spread of the virus overwhelms local medical and public health resources.

Catholics affirm the importance of both faith and reason. Reason dictates that we should take the health precautions recommended by medical and scientific professionals. Faith calls us to acknowledge that the saving grace of Christ is present in the midst of the limitations of this imperfect world, and to try our best to protect the life of those who are weak and vulnerable.

Until further notice, and effective immediately, Catholics are dispensed from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays.

For the 2-week period of March 17 to March 31:

- Public Masses in churches and chapels are temporarily suspended during this time period. Priests will continue to celebrate the Mass in private.
- Any Church activities involving gatherings of 10 or more people in the same room at the same time are to be cancelled or held virtually from March 17 to 31.
- Church members may still gather in small groups of fewer than 10 for Eucharistic Adoration, Rosary, Stations of the Cross, etc., practicing social distancing.

Ongoing Plans:

Other developments and subsequent instructions will come in the future, since the present situation is quite fluid and could change from day to day.

From now and into the foreseeable future, the following protocols apply in the Diocese of San Angelo:

Mass:

Rather than attending Mass, Catholics are encouraged during this time period to pray at home, meditate on the Scripture readings of the day, and experience the broadcast of the Mass through television, radio, or Internet. A list of stations and sites can be found on the website of the diocese at www.sanangelodiocese.org.

- Insofar as they are able, parishes are encouraged to use social media, television, or radio to broadcast their Masses.
- The Diocese of San Angelo will make Sunday Mass available online in English and Spanish.

All are encouraged to make a prayer of Spiritual Communion. A text for this prayer is found at www.sanangelodiocese.org

- Missalettes for home use are available free of charge online from a variety of organizations, including Magnificat and Our Sunday Visitor.
- Creative solutions such as a “parking lot Mass,” where the priest uses an outdoor altar, and the people remain in their cars listening to the Mass with a signal broadcast to cell phones through an app or to car radios by an FM transmitter, may be possible in some places.

Confession:

All upcoming Lenten Communal Penance Services are to be cancelled, but priests are to make times available for individual Confessions, using a protective screen or cloth barrier to block the transmission of germs. The penitent space should be frequently sanitized.

Weddings:

Wedding liturgies and receptions will be limited to 10 people or fewer or rescheduled.

Quinceañeras:

Celebrations of the Quinceañera blessing and receptions will be limited to 10 people or rescheduled.

Baptism:

May be celebrated in gatherings of 10 people or fewer, either with or without a Mass.

Confirmation:

Those Confirmation Masses previously scheduled to take place through May 10 will be rescheduled to later dates. For those Confirmation candidates who need to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation sooner, pastors are granted the faculty to confirm them during the time frame of the coronavirus protocols, effective immediately, until this faculty is withdrawn.

First Communion:

First Communion celebrations scheduled to take place through May 10 should be rescheduled to later dates.

Anointing of the Sick and Viaticum:

Priests will continue to make these sacraments available to those who need them, but they will practice careful precautions to avoid the transmission of disease. Anointing should be done wearing a glove and using a disposable cotton ball or cotton swab. Steps should be taken to avoid contaminating the oil stock. The cotton instrument should be isolated, contained, and later burned.

Masses with communal Anointing of the Sick should not be held.

Funerals:

We must pray for the dead and bury them. Funeral services will still take place, but the congregation size will be limited to the number of people recommended by the Centers for Disease Control.

Palm Sunday:

Priests will hold a simple, private service, after which people may pick up blessed palms from the parish.

Triduum:

The liturgies of the Paschal Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday) will not be celebrated publicly in the parishes.

RCIA:

The Scrutinies may be carried out in small settings by a priest or deacon.

The Sacraments of Initiation, normally administered at the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday, can be rescheduled for the Vigil of Pentecost on the evening of May 30 or a later date.

Events:

The following diocesan events are cancelled or postponed:

Priests' Retreat, San Angelo, March 16-20

Adult Confirmation, St. Ann, Midland, March 24

Andrew Dinner, St. Joseph, Odessa, March 26

Priests' Day of Reflection, Christoval, April 7

Chrism Mass, April 7 (oils will be blessed by the bishop privately and distributed)

Good Friday Procession, St. Margaret, San Angelo, April 10
Marriage Jubilee Mass, Sacred Heart Cathedral, April 19

Fish Fry events:

Parish activities such as fish fries should be available for take-out only, rather than serving the meals at tables.

Church buildings:

Whenever possible, church buildings will be kept open during the day for private prayer and Eucharistic Adoration, as alternatives to Sunday Mass.

Sanitizing:

Hymn books and other resources will be removed from the pews and sanitized during this time period, and they will not be returned until the coronavirus outbreak has passed.

Surfaces in church buildings will be regularly sanitized.

The Poor:

The limitations of this difficult time will affect the poor and daily wage earners heavily. All should be creative in going out of their way to help others with their basic needs.

Here are some practical suggestions of helpful actions to consider:

- donating to the local food bank
- offering to pick up prescriptions or groceries for vulnerable or at-risk neighbors
- refraining from panic buying at the store, which contributes to shortages for all
- contributing to the bank of sick leave for fellow employees at work

Stewardship:

According to their means, church members are encouraged to continue supporting their local parish financially, since the parish must continue to pay bills during this period of the coronavirus outbreak.

Donations can be brought to the parish, mailed, or submitted electronically. For those parishes who have not set up online giving, individuals can donate to their particular parish online at www.sanangelodiocese.org/covid-19.

Public Health:

All are asked to follow the guidance of public health officials.

Travel:

All are encouraged to limit unnecessary travel and to practice “social distancing” during this time period.

Social Distancing:

The practice of “social distancing” is not easy, but it helps to protect the common good in this difficult time. In this situation, keeping some physical distance means we truly care for one another, because we want to help break the chain of toxic transmission of a virus that is claiming the lives of so many. When we experience the deprivations of this social distancing, we seek to endure it in a spirit of human solidarity, for “if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). The law of charity supersedes all other obligations.

A Final Word:

Even in our solitude, God is close to us. We are never truly alone, because we belong to the Mystical Body of Christ.