

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Someone recently told me that she could hear the sigh of relief recently as restrictions were lifted that allowed for our churches to reopen. Numerous people have remarked how grateful they are to attend Sunday Mass and receive the sacraments, especially the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. And they have mentioned how good it is to pray and worship with others in person.

I have not heard any criticism about the need for distancing or the way in which the financial offerings of the people are collected in a manner that avoids unnecessary physical contact.

However, there is one concern that is increasingly being brought to my attention. It has to do with the use of face masks. A better way to describe it is the growing number of letters and email messages advising me that people are simply not wearing face masks inside church.

A number of reasons for not wearing face masks have been shared with me, including:

- It's hard to breathe because it is too warm in church
- We are in the green zone, so masks are no longer necessary
- It's too awkward for my kids who keep pulling them off
- Where I live we are strong people and we have that herd immunity
- As a young adult I have been out socializing with friends and no one has masks

I am well aware that no one wants to tell others to wear a mask. Pastors don't want to be the bad guy. Ushers don't want people giving them an earful if they mention anything about masks. Parents are frustrated when they try to get their children to cooperate.

As I listen to all of those comments, I am also mindful of the concerns of people who come to Mass with the reasonable expectation that everyone is doing their part in observing the directives that were announced as a necessary part of the reopening of churches.

I am also mindful of the expert advice I have received and continue to receive. The message remains the same. Masks are the most important means of protecting yourself and others when you find yourself in a group.

In places throughout the country where businesses have reopened and people are gathering without using face masks, there has been an alarming increase in the number of COVID-19 cases. News reports indicate that the number of confirmed cases in the past month have doubled in many of those places. As a result, the restrictions and closures are being reinstated.

The people of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown have been known as being pro-life. That value and commitment of being pro-life is not limited to being against abortion of children. It extends from conception to natural death. It extends to every human person because we are all made in the image and likeness of God.

The care we have for ourselves and for the well-being and safety of others is found in Sacred Scripture. Just think of the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-15), when the Lord asked Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" And Cain replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

We know the answer is yes. We are responsible for each other. Our Lord Jesus Christ affirmed that when he reminded us that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27). And Jesus went on to describe in the story of the Good Samaritan that we must literally go out of our way to help someone in need (Luke 10:29-37).

In that famous Gospel story, Jesus reminds us that there are times when caring for others involves an inconvenience and even a sacrifice on their part. That care for others is to be generous and done with compassion for the other person.

So how does this apply to all of us when it comes to COVID-19, face masks, and being in the parish church for Mass?

Wearing a face mask is a way in which we can love ourselves, since it is for our individual protection. Wearing a face mask is a way in which we can love our neighbors, so that an invisible virus is not spread from one to another. And remember, there are lots of people who have COVID-19, but they don't have any symptoms; they don't know that they have it.

I AM REPEATING MY PERSONAL APPEAL TO ALL OF YOU TO USE A FACE MASK WHEN YOU ATTEND MASS AND OTHER PARISH GATHERINGS.

In previously announced guidelines, I advised that the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days remains in effect, but if you cannot or should not attend due to medical conditions, you are encouraged to watch Mass on TV or via the internet.

Some people have chronic health conditions that make it extremely difficult to use a mask. If you are in that category, you are not obliged to attend Mass. At the same time, if you wish to receive Holy Communion, you should make that known so that Holy Communion may be brought to you as long as that is necessary. This can be done by a priest, deacon, or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion.

If it's just too warm to wear a mask during Mass, you can remain outside, and wait to receive Holy Communion without entering the church according to the plan that each parish should have in place.

ALTAR SERVERS, EXTRAORDINARY MINISTERS, READERS (except for when they are actually reading), AND ANYONE ELSE WHO ENTERS INTO THE SANCTUARY (including deacons/priests) ARE TO WEAR A MASK.

MASKS ARE TO BE WORN BY USHERS, ORGANISTS, SONG LEADERS (except when they are engaged in singing).

When you are in church for Mass, THE MASK SHOULD ONLY BE REMOVED FOR A BRIEF MOMENT WHEN YOU ARE ABOUT TO RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION, AND THEN IT SHOULD BE PUT BACK IN PLACE UNTIL MASS IS FINISHED AND YOU HAVE EXITED THE CHURCH.

The use of face masks is the number one means of protecting yourself and others from the spread of COVID-19.

I received a number of compliments from public health officials and government leaders for the implementation of the measures that were in place in our churches, schools, and other parish buildings.

I take this opportunity to thank all of you again for your cooperation in this effort. However, I need to be clear that unless the proper precaution of utilizing face masks is observed by everyone, it may result in the closures once again. No one wants to return to that experience.

So here is the bottom line: FACE MASKS ARE NOT OPTIONAL WHEN WE COME TO CHURCH.

As the slogan goes, “We are all in this together.” And that includes the presence of the Lord Jesus among us and with us.

Don’t let yourself even think about a slogan once suggested by Cain in the very first book of the Bible: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Apparently Cain did not know the answer. But you do. “We are all in this together.”

Enjoy the July 4 Independence Day celebrations; but be safe. And enjoy the rest of the summer by taking good care of each other.

Bishop Mark