Planning for the Future: What to Expect When Public Masses Resume

"As time unfolds, people coming back into normal activities is probably going to happen a little more slowly than some might expect. We will do all that we can to facilitate our return to Mass, but ultimately must provide for the safety of the people God has given to our care."

—Bishop Joseph C. Bambera—

With the national and statewide conversation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic now focused on "reopening" businesses, many people in the Diocese of Scranton are wondering when the suspension of public Masses will be lifted.

While thankful for the technology that has kept parishes connected for the last six weeks, the Diocese of Scranton fully recognizes the faithful's strong desire to return to parishes and to receive the Eucharist – which is our Spiritual life-blood.

Diocesan leadership is currently discussing ways to safely return to sacramental life – even if on a limited basis. Relying on guidance from the state and federal governments, as well as healthcare professionals, we are committed to safely and prudently resuming worship.

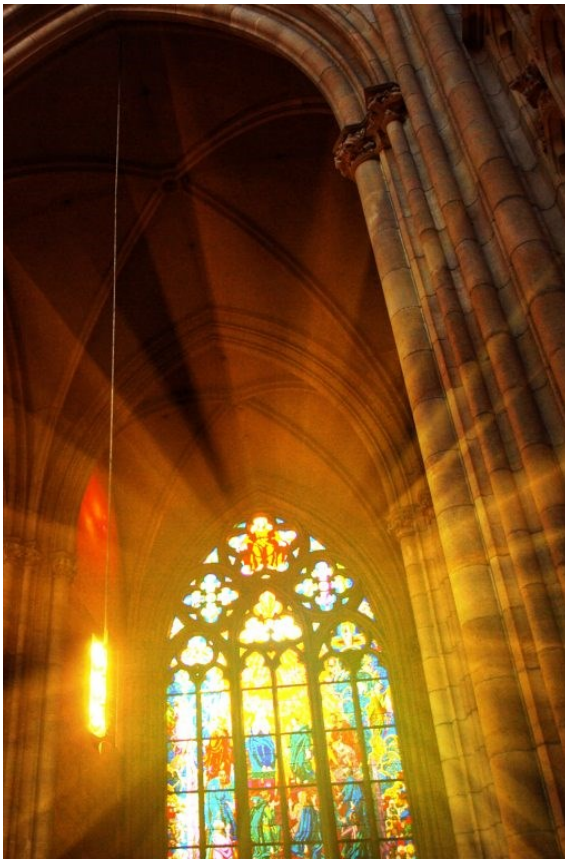
While specific details of "when" and "how" public Masses will resume are still being determined, the following things will be important for parishioners to consider:

1. **The general dispensation from the Sunday Mass obligation will remain in place.**

   Regardless of when restrictions are lifted in a specific region of Pennsylvania, there will understandably be people, especially people in vulnerable or at-risk groups, who will feel it is safer to stay home than attend Mass. Potential limits on crowd sizes that are allowed in parishes will also play a part. The faithful are encouraged to keep the Sabbath holy by participating in a parish livestream Mass or utilizing Catholic Television.

2. **Livestreaming opportunities should continue due to attendance limitations.**
   Recognizing that as regions of the Commonwealth initially transition from Governor Tom Wolf's "red phase" to "yellow phase," there will still be guidelines on the attendance numbers for any public gatherings. No one should expect to be able to attend Mass with regularity, so parishes that are currently livestreaming Masses will be encouraged to continue doing so.

3. **Social distancing will be maintained.**
   Expect that the recommended social distancing guideline of six feet will need to be respected when entering and leaving a church, as well as in regards to seating and a potential Communion procession. As required by Pennsylvania state guidelines, parishioners would be required to wear a mask and anyone who is showing any symptoms of sickness will be told to stay home. Social gatherings before or after Mass will also not be permitted.



4. **Liturgical changes will be in place.**
   Just like when the coronavirus started surfacing in Pennsylvania in March, the Diocese of Scranton established guidelines for the distribution of Holy Communion and exchanging the Sign of Peace without physical contact. Similar guidelines will also be established as any individual church would be allowed to begin worship again.

5. **Safety concerns, in addition to the virus itself, will determine the timeline.**
   During Mass on Tuesday, April 28, 2020, Pope Francis prayed for prudence as communities begin lifting their lockdowns. The Holy Father said, "At this time, when we are beginning to receive instructions for coming out of quarantine, we pray that the Lord would give his people – all of us – the grace of prudence and obedience to the instructions so that the pandemic does not return." As this process unfolds, there will certainly be challenges but the safety of our community will remain the benchmark. As the Diocese moves forward it requests that parishioners stay informed and stay flexible to any updates.

By working together, the Diocese of Scranton is hopeful that people will soon be able to return to our churches, even if in a limited capacity, with the important understanding that things will not immediately be going back to normal.