News



In this Nov. 13, 2017, file photo, then-Miami Auxiliary Bishop Peter Baldacchino sits with fellow members of the the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops during a session at the USCCB's annual fall meeting in Baltimore. Baldacchino, who is now a bishop in Las Cruces, N.M. announced April, 15, 2020, that the Las Cruces Diocese would "reopen" churches and lift the ban on public celebrations of Mass, a move believed to be a first by a diocese in the U.S. amid the coronavirus pandemic. (AP/Patrick Semansky)

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Rio Rancho, N.M. — April 16, 2020

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A Roman Catholic diocese in New Mexico announced April 15 it will reopen churches and allow a small number of people to attend public celebrations of Mass in what could be the first move to alter a diocese-declared ban on public services in the U.S.

Priests were encouraged to hold public Mass at Las Cruces Diocese parishes while having parishioners abide by social distancing restrictions ordered by Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, diocese spokesman Christopher Velasquez said.

That means churches can only hold Mass with five or less people in attendance and they must stay 6 feet apart, Velasquez said.

"If you show up to your parish without calling first, you might be turned away," Velasquez said.

The diocese also announced it would allow priests to hold outdoor Mass services while people stay in their cars.

The Santa Fe Archdiocese and Gallup Diocese — New Mexico's other Catholic dioceses — are continuing a ban on gatherings and in-person Mass services.

Las Cruces Bishop Peter Baldacchino made the decision about the limited opening of churches after hearing news reports about the spread of COVID-19 in southern New Mexico, Velasquez said

"We are hearing reports about divorces, drug abuse and now people losing their jobs," Velasquez said. "The church is here to offer hope."

The Catholic News Agency reports Baldacchino is the first in the nation to modify a declared diocesan ban on public Masses.

The bishop also made provision for priests to resume weddings and funerals as along as state regulations on social distancing are followed.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops shared steps with members that could be taken in response to the outbreak. Since then, bishops across the U.S. moved to cancel in-person Mass services, closed schools and halted Easter pilgrimages.

States also have imposed restrictions on social gatherings involving places of worship.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia, and death.

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