News



Bishop Peter Baldacchino wears a mask and gloves while giving Communion to a passenger of a vehicle during the Easter Vigil in the parking lot of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Las Cruces, New Mexico, April 11. (CNS/Courtesy of Las Cruces Diocese/David McNamara)



by Peter Feuerherd

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Most faithful American Catholics are now in the midst of a post-Lenten and post-Easter eucharistic pandemic fast, forced to participate in Mass via social media and television. But not at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

For the past few Sundays, Bishop Peter Baldacchino has been celebrating Mass from a stage located in front of the church. There he prays near the cathedral parking lot, every other space filled to assure proper distancing, with ushers pointing directions to driver worshipers. Many of the parked parishioners hear the liturgy via their car radios. Some close their windows in recognition of the pandemic. The host is distributed at each car via ministers in masks and gloves.

Just a few weeks ago, Catholics in the Las Cruces Diocese were much like those in the rest of the country, abstaining from the Eucharist, per civic orders about social distancing during the pandemic. But on April 15, Baldacchino, saying he was concerned about an increase in alcoholism, drug addiction and domestic abuse, wrote in a letter to his priests that Mass was an essential service, despite a ruling otherwise from the state of New Mexico, and that he wanted liturgies available to parishioners.

"Simply put, in the midst of financial uncertainty, fear for one's health, pandemic induced anxiety and confinement to their homes, people definitely need a word of hope," he wrote. So Baldacchino provides that in the front of the cathedral each Sunday, and has encouraged his pastors, if possible, to do the same at their parishes.

Las Cruces is rare, but is not a singular exception.

At St. Elizabeth of the Hill Church in Boone, North Carolina, the Easter Sunday Mass, according to a number of parishioners, included more than twice the mandated 10-person limit established by the state. Fr. Brendan Buckler, pastor, offered Mass in Latin, while exceeding the mandated state limits of 10 per public gathering.

The Charlotte Diocese has not responded to NCR requests for comments, but Bishop Peter Jugis has said the diocese supports the statewide restrictions on public gatherings in the interest of public safety.

Bishop Austin Vetter of Helena, Montana, allowed for public Mass in his diocese April 26. While he said no Catholic was obligated to attend, there were going to be at least some parishes offering public Mass, as long as they were able to provide proper sanitizing and public spacing. He said he did so as the state government there loosened social restrictions.

He noted that other parishes, because of a lack of sanitary measures and the need for social distancing, would not open April 26.

"Feel no pressure at all ... to come to Mass," he said, noting that the old and medically vulnerable, as well as parents with small children, might not feel comfortable coming back to church at this time.

Attorney General William Barr has warned state and local governments to not be harsher on churches than on other institutions in enforcing mandated social distancing.

In a call with faith leaders April 23, Barr, who is Catholic, said "draconian" measures of social distancing were necessary to slow the spread of the disease. But as the country moves toward the administration's three-stage plan for "Opening America," Barr noted that restrictions "cannot single out religious activity."

"We cannot put stricter rules applicable to religion that you're not also going to place on comparable secular activity," he said, citing a case in Mississippi in which the Department of Justice filed a statement of interest in support of a church that wanted a drive-through Easter service.

Still, Las Cruces, Helena and Boone remain outliers, at least in Catholic circles. Even in states where governors have loosened restrictions, Catholic dioceses are largely holding back on welcoming large-scale gatherings in the interests of health. One such state is Florida.

Every Monday morning, the bishops of Florida gather via Zoom conference to discuss the church's response to the pandemic. Even as some beaches in the northern reaches of the state are now open, the state's seven Catholic dioceses are holding to the public eucharistic fast. No large church gatherings are allowed.

As of March 15, public Masses have been canceled throughout the state. In the Miami Archdiocese, the epicenter of the outbreak in Florida, public Mass is not

allowed, and parishioners participate in liturgy via livestreaming.

Archbishop Thomas Wenski — who ordained former Miami auxiliary Baldacchino as bishop six years ago — told his pastors, however, to keep parish offices open and respond to pastoral calls, if they themselves are not among vulnerable groups. Parishes have responded in creative ways, setting up phone trees to check on vulnerable parishioners, organizing shopping for the elderly, with Catholic Charities distributing food in the Florida Keys and other parts of the archdiocese. Many parishes offer livestreamed Mass.



A police officer in Miami talks to a tourist about the closing of the beach due to coronavirus March 19. (CNS/Reuters/Maria Alejandra Cardona)

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued a stay-at-home order in March, only to allow for beach openings and church gatherings in April. "I don't think the government has the authority to close a church," DeSantis said in an executive order issued in early April.

"The governor gave mixed signals," Wenski told NCR. "It was not so helpful. I think he tripped over himself. That could be a rookie mistake." DeSantis, a new governor, was elected last year.

Wenski appreciated that the governor described the churches as essential services. But the archbishop is keeping churches' public gatherings forbidden, particularly as Southern Florida remains the epicenter of the virus in the Sunshine State. Miami-Dade County has more than 10,000 coronavirus cases, more than any other county in the state. More rural parts of the state have relatively few cases.

The Monday morning meetings of the state's bishops both monitor current developments and offer a vehicle to talk about how churches might reopen. "We're comparing notes," Wenski said.

As bishops inch back to whatever a new normal might mean in the aftermath of the pandemic shutdown, some Catholics remain cautious.

A Minnesota Catholic man, who did not want to be identified because he said he and his wife are active volunteers in their parish, is a cancer survivor who questions his local archbishop, Bernard Hebda of Minneapolis-St. Paul, who has encouraged pastors to offer drive-in services. "What is the point of that?" he told NCR. The parishioner looks at livestreaming Mass and sees altar servers lined up next to celebrants, violating social distancing norms.

The message from the church ought to be unequivocally clear, he told NCR: "Tell people to say home where they are safe."

Other Twin Cities Catholics disagree.

"The archbishop's April 17th letter is excellent. It certainly seems to me that Archbishop Hebda and the Archdiocese have taken the right and necessary course for all concerned," said Hank Shea, a professor of law at St. Thomas University in Minneapolis.

In that letter, Hebda praised restrictions on church activities, saying they had saved lives, and cautioned Twin Cities' Catholics to be patient in wanting to restore normal liturgical activities.

On April 12, Hebda welcomed a bumper-to-bumper line that stretched nine blocks in front of the Cathedral of St. Paul filled with Twin Cities Catholics seeking an Easter blessing. He was joined by Auxiliary Bishop Andrew Cozzens.

At St. Augustine Church in St. Paul, news video indicated Catholics waiting in line for Communion this past Holy Week in numbers far exceeding that mandated by state regulations limiting gatherings to 10 or fewer.

Baldacchino of Las Cruces argued in his April 15 statement that efforts to substitute social media worship is not enough.

"While it is true that we need to take every reasonable precaution to reduce the spread of Coronavirus, it is equally true that we offer the greatest 'essential service' to our people," he wrote.

The bishop added: "Televised Masses have been at attempt to bridge the gap during this time, but this is not enough. The 'evangelion,' the Gospel, the Good News of Christ, risen from the dead must be proclaimed. The eternal life offered in Christ Jesus needs to be announced."

Most of Baldacchino's bishop colleagues see it differently. But whether it happens soon, or later, churches will reopen.

It's been a long Lent, Catholics are now in the joy of an Easter season that is far less gleeful, and the question remains: When will all this end?

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Back in Florida, the Monday morning bishops' meetings focus on doing as much as possible under current health guidelines while looking at what a reopened church

might look like.

"Even when we open up, we will have to provide safe distancing," said Wenski, who emphasized that the current restrictions are intended to "bend the curve" so that health care facilities are prepared to treat the sick. Health care experts warn that the virus will not magically disappear.

Wenski sees a new normal, in which older parishioners, who are vulnerable, might be told to stay home. RSVPs communicated online might be needed to assure proper spacing at Sunday liturgies.

There will be other questions: Should everyone wear masks to church? Should ministers of Communion include those who are considered the vulnerable and the elderly? Should collections transmitting dollars, possibly contaminated with the virus, be part of the Mass? What about the dismissal after Mass? Should parishioners crowd the aisles on the way out the door? Should priest and eucharistic ministers wear masks in distributing Communion? Should the host be allowed to be distributed on the tongue?

"These are all the things we are already starting to wrestle with," said Wenski. "It will make going back to church different than it was before."

[Peter Feuerherd is NCR news editor. NCR executive editor Heidi Schlumpf contributed to this story.]

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