News



by Joshua J. McElwee

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Days after the U.S. bishops' conference forwarded a set of suggestions for how Catholic prelates might restart the public celebration of the Mass during the coronavirus pandemic, the national organization of diocesan liturgical officials has published its own separate set of recommendations.

The guidelines from the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions differ from those offered by the bishops on one major point: whether Catholics should be allowed to receive Communion on the tongue.

Where the bishops' guidelines, prepared by the Thomistic Institute at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, say it is possible to offer Communion on the tongue "without unreasonable risk," those from the federation suggest that reception on the tongue be temporarily prohibited.

The new proposals illuminate the issue with a quotation from Fr. Michael Nolan, an adjutant judicial vicar for the diocese of Wichita, Kansas.

"I think the present pandemic is a very justifiable reason to require Holy Communion in the hand," writes Nolan.

"No one has the right to endanger the life of another even unknowingly by demanding Communion on the tongue when the persons following could be exposed

to a virus of which the oral recipient is not yet aware," the priest states.

The new guidelines from the federation, made available on its website May 4, take the form of a series of practical suggestions for diocesan liturgy offices to consider in consultation with their respective bishops.

The U.S. bishops' guidelines were first reported by NCR May 3, and were sent to prelates across the country April 30 by Hartford, Connecticut Archbishop Leonard Blair, head of the bishops' Committee on Divine Worship.

The new guidelines from the federation open with a series of seven general principles, the first of which is "the common good is our priority."

"Our first consideration must be for the health and safety of our parishioners and those whom they will encounter," it states.

"Let’s admit to ourselves that while we as clergy, liturgists, and musicians have expertise on liturgical practices and sacramental theology, we must rely on medical personnel and scientists to give the best advice in these matters," it continues.

Other principles include continuing to offer live-streamed Masses for those who are most vulnerable to the effects of the virus, and to "think long term."

"Understandably, everyone is anxious to return to normalcy," it states. "But the threat of the coronavirus is still very much with us. Even now, some areas of the country continue to experience new cases and increased fatality rates."

"This will certainly impact the way we worship and the rituals which are a vital part of our faith," it continues.

Among the practical suggestions the federation puts forward: sanitizing hand-rails and doorknobs in churches after every Mass celebration, planning ahead for when supplies of disinfectant may become sparse in local communities, and keeping decoration of the church to a minimum, so as not to have to disinfect or launder such items frequently.

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The U.S. bishops' guidelines were prepared by a working group at the Thomistic Institute that included two medical doctors and five priests.

They took their cue from the Trump administration's "Opening Up America Again" plan, which says the country will return to normalcy in three phases, allowing for gatherings first of groups of 10 people, then 50 and then on a more regular, unlimited basis.

The federation mentions the bishops' guidelines at the end of its own proposals, saying that while the bishops' document "has many fine points, it has some points with which individual bishops might disagree."

"For example, it suggests that Communion on the tongue is possible and the document gives an option for Communion after Mass (with hand sanitizer in between communicants)," the federation notes about the bishops' document.

[Joshua J. McElwee (jmcelwee@ncronline.org) is NCR Vatican correspondent. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

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