News



Archbishop Bernard A. Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis prays in front of the Blessed Sacrament at the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul March 27, 2020. Minnesota bishops announced May 20 that they are moving forward with plans to reopen Mass, defying current state limitations requiring 10 or fewer people at faith-based gatherings. (CNS/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

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Minnesota's bishops are moving ahead with plans to resume Masses at one-third church capacity May 26, a plan that defies current state directives limiting faith-based gatherings to 10 or fewer people.

The bishops announced the plan in a May 20 letter to the faithful following a news conference where Gov. Tim Walz and other members of his administration outlined a plan for the reopening of restaurants, bars and salons.

With no definite timeline from the state for a wider reopening of places of worship, despite repeated requests from the bishops and several meetings with members of the Walz administration, the bishops said they are giving parishes statewide permission to begin celebrating public Mass.

"Our decision to suspend the public celebration of Mass was painful," the bishops stated in a May 20 letter to the faithful. "We made that decision not because we were compelled to do so, but because we judged that the circumstances required it. We believe that those circumstances have changed, as confirmed by the governor's decision to end the stay-at-home order and allow more commerce."

Their plan, they said, would allow parishes to begin celebrating Mass at one-third capacity ahead of and in preparation for Pentecost, May 31.

The bishops emphasized that they have demonstrated willingness to collaborate with the Walz administration, and that they have sought guidance of state health officials to strengthen safety protocols.

On May 1, in anticipation of the end of Walz's stay-at-home order, the bishops had encouraged parishes to prepare to reopen for public Masses May 18, with a one-third

capacity limit and in compliance with sanitary and social distancing guidelines.

Along with some Lutheran church leaders, the Catholic bishops shared their plans for reopening with Walz's administration May 8. On May 13, Walz outlined the next phase of his pandemic plan in a new executive order, "Stay Safe Minnesota," which loosened restrictions in many areas of life, but retained the 10-person limit on religious gatherings he began under his previous stay-at-home order.

On May 15, Archbishop Bernard A. Hebda of St. Paul and Minneapolis expressed his disappointment with Walz's omission of a plan for larger faith-based gatherings under his new order, but he said he was hopeful meetings scheduled with his administration May 18 and 19 would yield a plan forward.

The May 20 letter to the faithful noted that the bishops twice sent a letter to the governor asking for discussion about their plan, with the most recent letter sent May 16. They have spoken with public health and safety officials, but not received a concrete timeline for resuming public worship with "reasonable guidance on congregational size."

The bishops noted in their May 20 letter that they believe they have been "leading by example" by their cooperation with public health officials, their efforts to help struggling families and their attempts to find creative ways to minister to the suffering and those serving them.

The bishops began to restrict public Masses before Walz's stay-at-home order, which began March 27. The state announced its first confirmed case of coronavirus March 6, and Walz announced March 13 that the state was in a peacetime state of emergency.

Hebda suspended Catholics' ordinary obligation to attend Sunday Mass beginning that weekend, March 14-15, and Catholic schools closed the following week. On March 18, Hebda suspended public Masses in the archdiocese. Funeral Masses and weddings with 10 or fewer people were permitted.



Sunday Mass at St. Alphonsus in Brooklyn Center, Minn., is sparsely attended March 15, 2020, due to concerns about spreading the coronavirus. Minnesota bishops announced May 20 that they are moving forward with plans to reopen Mass, defying current state limitations requiring 10 or fewer people at faith-based gatherings. (CNS/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

In April, Walz described his approach to lifting pandemic-related restrictions on the state's businesses, schools and social gathering as a turning of the dial, with corresponding diagrams for each to illustrate his vision. His plan to push forward with reopening stores, malls and restaurants in late May and early June flummoxed church leaders, as those actions are a much greater turn on the governor's business dial than "places of worship," which were illustrated around the noon position on the social gatherings dial.

"It is now permissible for an unspecified number of people to go to shopping malls and enter stores, so long as no more than 50% of the occupancy capacity is reached," the bishops said in their May 20 letter.

"Big-box stores have hundreds of people inside at any one time, and the number of goods that are being handled and distributed in one store by many people — stock staff, customers, cashiers — is astounding. Workers are present for many hours per day, often in close proximity. There is no state mandate that customers wear masks in those malls or stores, wash their hands consistently, or follow any specific cleaning protocol," they said.

"In these circumstances, and given the well-researched protocols that we have proposed — and that are being followed successfully elsewhere in our nation — how can reason require us any longer to keep our faithful from the Eucharist?" they asked.

The Minnesota bishops' protocols are based on practices developed by the Thomistic Institute, a group of national medical experts and theologians, which were released April 28 and have informed the practices of other dioceses that have resumed public Masses. The bishops have told state officials they are willing to adjust their protocols upon review.

The bishops are continuing the suspension of the faithful's obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation. They also have urged Catholics who are 65 and older or with medical conditions not to attend Mass at this time.

In their May 20 letter, the bishops emphasized that they are not requiring parishes to begin public Mass May 26, and that some parishes may choose not to resume public Masses at this time or may choose to stick with the 10-person limit. They also acknowledged that their plan may need to be adjusted based on changes in the pandemic situation.

The bishops framed their decision in the context of religious liberty, stating, "we are blessed to live in a nation that guarantees the free exercise of religion."

"This right can only be abridged for a compelling governmental interest, and only in a way that is narrowly tailored to be the least restrictive means of achieving the desired end," they said. "That is why a large majority of states now allow in-person religious services, including many states that had previously suspended in-person religious services. We think that the executive order issued last Wednesday fails this test."

They continued: "An order that sweeps so broadly that it prohibits, for example, a gathering of 11 people in a Cathedral with a seating capacity of several thousand defies reason. Therefore, we have chosen to move forward in the absence of any specific timeline laid out by Gov. Walz and his administration. We cannot allow an indefinite suspension of the public celebration of the Mass."

(Wiering is editor of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis)

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