News



St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City is seen on Easter April 12, 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Jeenah Moon)

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Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York and other church officials announced a multistep plan to reopen the 288 parish churches of the archdiocese as the coronavirus pandemic eases.

Called Faith Forward, the plan introduced May 21 offers a five-step phasing that will seek to move gradually and safely toward a return to the availability of the sacraments and, ultimately Sunday Mass attendance, with a limited capacity.

The guidelines were outlined during a morning new conference at Our Saviour Church in Manhattan.

Msgr. Joseph LaMorte, archdiocesan vicar general, described his work leading a task force comprised of priests and senior staff members of archdiocesan offices that created the guidelines during the past six weeks.

He said two driving forces guided task force members in their discussions: a return to the Mass and the sacraments because "everybody misses them very, very much," and safety.

Task force members recognized, he added, that the return to the celebration of Mass and the sacraments be accomplished "in a safe, gradual way, following the advice of health officials and observing the guidelines of the elected officials."

Because the exposure to the novel coronavirus experienced by Catholics in New York City and nearby suburbs was much greater than in the upper counties of the sprawling archdiocese, "we recognize that not every parish will open at the same time," LaMorte said.

The plan calls for priests to be tested weekly for the virus. "It's a great reassurance for the people," he said.

As the news conference opened, Dolan noted the "10 difficult weeks" experienced by the archdiocese and its 2.8 million Catholics since the onset of the coronavirus crisis. Churches have been closed other than for private prayer since the weekend of March 14-15.

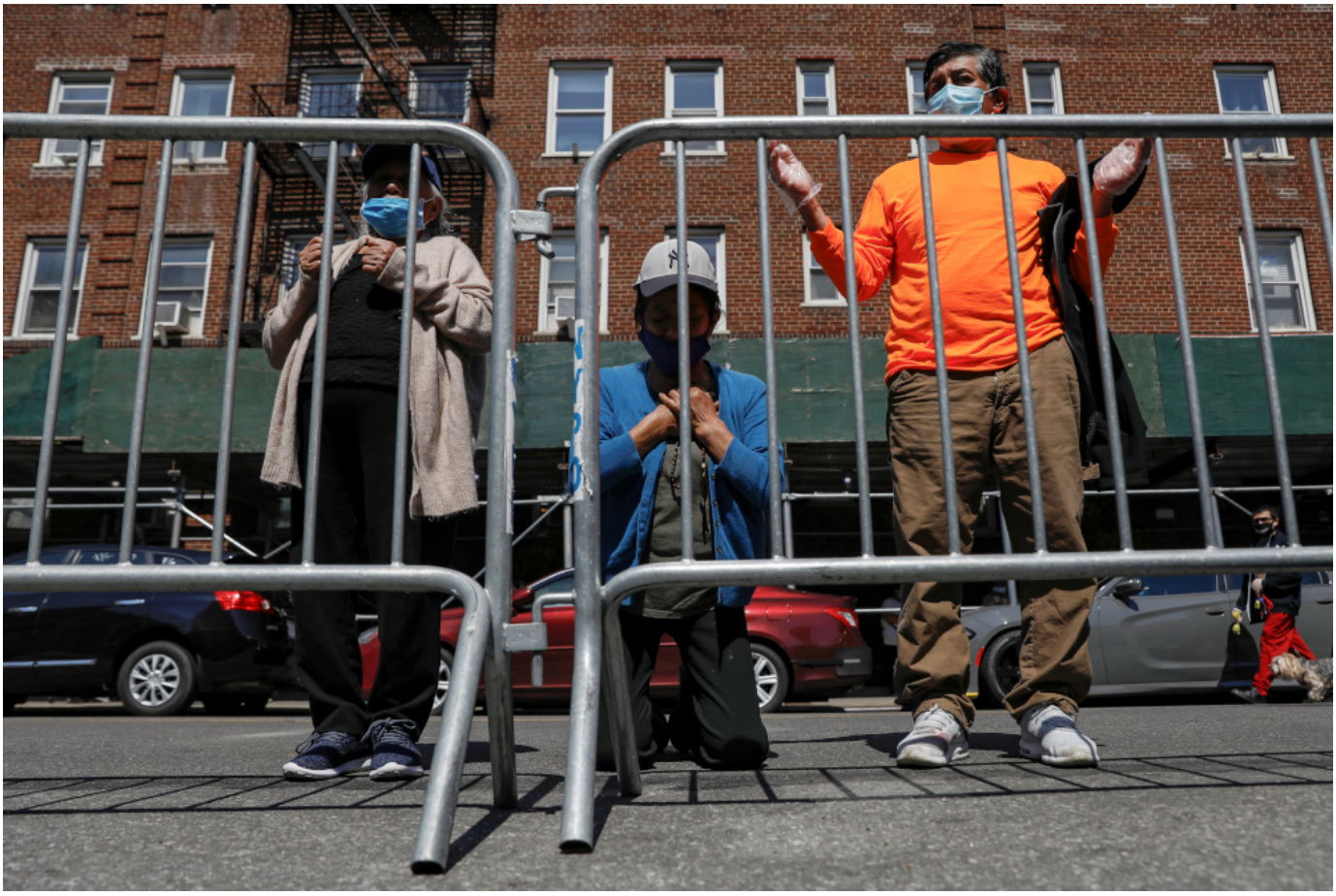
Dolan said the archdiocesan plan was approved by Dr. Michael Phillips, chief hospital epidemiologist at NYU Langone Health, and Dr. Walid Michelen, chief medical officer for ArchCare, which serves frail and vulnerable people.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, New York, which includes the New York boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, joined the news conference. The two boroughs have been particularly hit hard by COVID-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus.

The third borough most severely impacted by the virus is the Bronx, which along with Manhattan and Staten Island, is part of the Archdiocese of New York. The archdiocese stretches north and west to include seven other counties: Westchester, Rockland, Orange, Putnam, Sullivan, Dutchess and Ulster.

"The Catholic community in New York City ... has been constant in its allegiance to the very wise restrictions of our respected health care professionals and our elected officials these 10 difficult weeks and we intend to continue to do so," Dolan said.

"Houses of worship provide essential services for the well-being of our people," the cardinal said. "We hear from them daily. They very much miss Mass and holy Communion, the sacraments," including confession, baptisms, confirmation and various other liturgical celebrations.



People in the Queens borough of New York City pray at St. Bartholomew Church May 15, 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Brendan McDermid)

The cardinal said the archdiocese and its parishes have "a moral imperative to protect the health of our people and the wider community. We have been doing that ... and we will continue doing that."

"We also have a responsibility to care for the hearts and souls of our people."

The five phases outlined in the plan are:

— First phase: Churches open for private prayer and confessions.

— Second phase: Celebration of baptisms and marriages, with a limit of 10 attendees.

— Third phase: Celebration of the rite of distributing holy Communion outside of Mass.

— Fourth phase: Celebration of daily Masses and funeral Masses with limited attendance.

— Fifth phase: Celebration of Sunday Mass with supervised attendance of approximately 25% of the church's permitted occupancy

The guidelines said the vicar general's office would release a detailed description of each phase in the coming weeks following consultation with health and government officials while considering health metrics. Different regions of the archdiocese are expected to begin the process of reopening at different times.

An executive summary of Faith Forward cites the eagerness of New York's Catholic community to resume public worship "in a safe and responsible manner." It goes on to say that "we are proposing a phased plan which follows the latest guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and which, at the same time, respects our traditions."

General principles in the policy call for churches to be regularly sanitized and disinfected; Massgoers required to wear masks; no physical contact during the sign of peace; training of ushers to receive parishioners and escort them to suitable seating in line with social-distancing protocols; empty holy water and baptismal fonts; and the use of online worship aids will be encouraged.

Holy Communion will be limited to distribution of the host.

Msgr. Kevin Sullivan, executive director of archdiocesan Catholic Charities and administrator of Our Saviour Church, offered practical examples of how the guidelines would be applied in the church.

He said holy water bowls have been removed, missals and other worship aids would be taken out of the church, and masks would be provided to Massgoers who are not wearing them when they enter.

Seating in pews was marked to observe social distancing requirements, with some sections reserved for families and other seating for individuals.

He also showed how social distancing could be practiced in the area near the baptismal font, and that the sanctuary was sufficiently large for a small wedding ceremony.

"That gives you an idea of how in one church, we can be safe and we can pray together," Sullivan said.

(Woods is editor-in-chief of Catholic New York, newspaper of the Archdiocese of New York.)

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