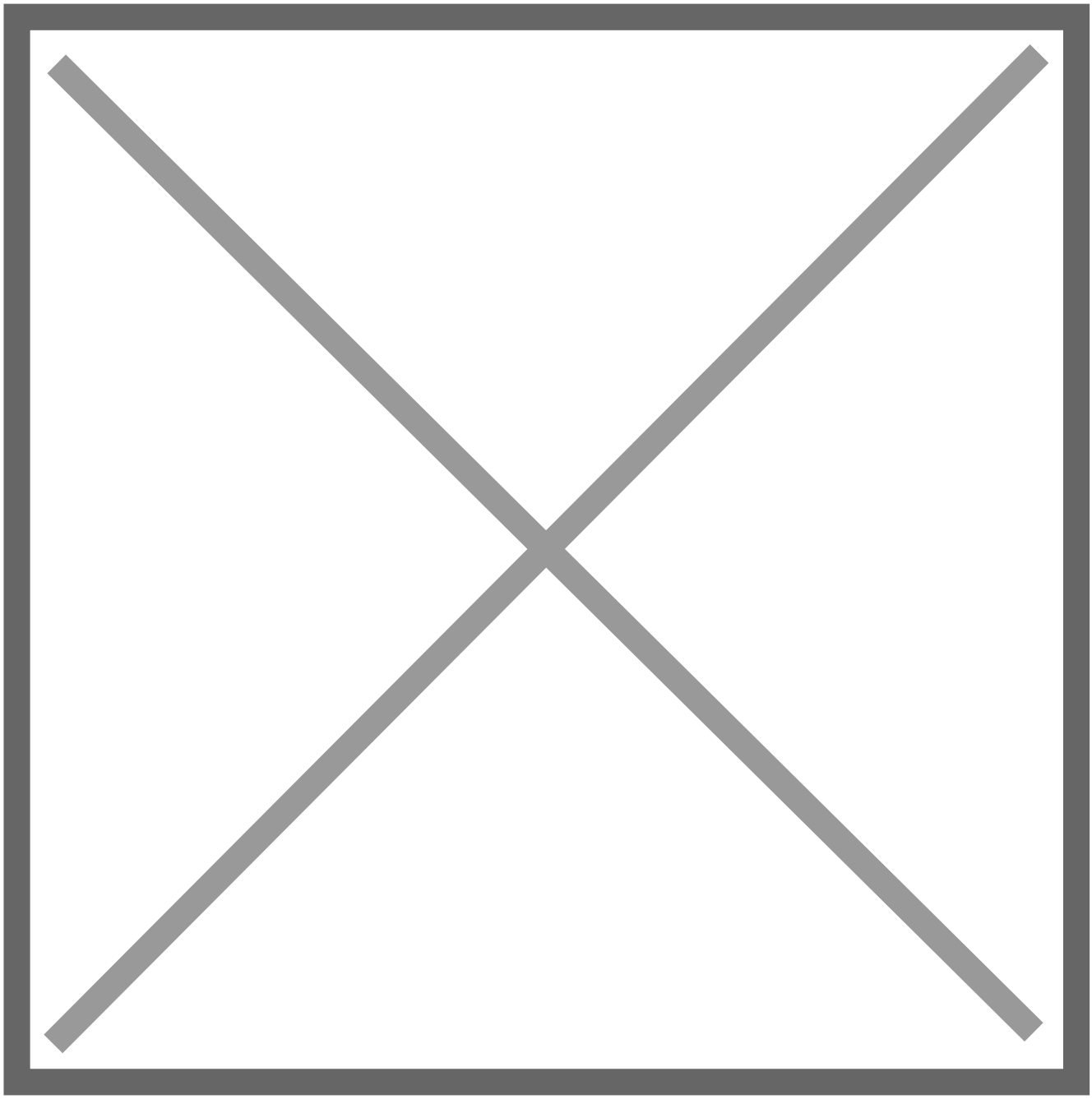
News
Vatican



Cardinal Robert Sarah, head of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, is pictured in a file photo. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Carol Glatz

View Author Profile



Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Vatican City — September 14, 2020

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Church services and Mass online cannot compare to or replace the in-person participation of the faithful, the head of the Vatican's office for divine worship told the world's bishops.

"As soon as circumstances permit, however, it is necessary and urgent to return to the normality of Christian life, which has the church building as its home and the celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist," wrote Cardinal Robert Sarah.

"Once the concrete measures that can be taken to reduce the spread of the virus to a minimum have been identified and adopted, it is necessary that all resume their place in the assembly of brothers and sisters," he wrote.

The letter by the cardinal, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, was sent to the presidents of national bishops' conferences worldwide.

Pope Francis approved the publication of the letter during an audience with the cardinal Sept. 3, according to Vatican News, which then provided excerpts from the message Sept. 12.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cardinal wrote, "a great sense of responsibility has emerged."

"In listening to and collaborating with civil authorities and experts," he wrote, bishops "were prompt to make difficult and painful decisions, even to the point of suspending the participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist for a

long period."

God never abandons humanity, he wrote, and "even the hardest trials can bear fruits of grace."

"We have accepted our distance from the Lord's altar as a time of Eucharistic fasting, useful for us to rediscover its vital importance, beauty and immeasurable preciousness," Sarah said.

But, as soon as is possible, the cardinal wrote, "we must return to the Eucharist ... with an increased desire to meet the Lord, to be with him, to receive him and to bring him to our brothers and sisters with the witness of a life full of faith, love and hope."

The cardinal underlined that even though communication outlets have offered "a valued service to the sick and those who are unable to go to church, and have performed a great service in the broadcast of Holy Mass at a time when there was no possibility of community celebrations, no broadcast is comparable to personal participation or can replace it."

Participating only virtually risks "distancing us from a personal and intimate encounter with the incarnate God" whose presence among his people was not virtual, but real, he added.

"This physical contact with the Lord is vital, indispensable, irreplaceable."

That means that as soon as measures for reducing the spread of the virus have been adopted, the faithful need to "resume their place in the assembly" and those who have been "discouraged, frightened, absent or uninvolved for too long" need to be invited and encouraged to return, he wrote.

However, needed "attention to hygiene and safety regulations cannot lead to the sterilization of gestures and rites, to the instilling, even unconsciously, of fear and insecurity in the faithful," he cautioned.

"It is up to the prudent but firm action of the bishops to ensure that the participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist is not reduced by public authorities to a 'gathering' and is not considered comparable or even subordinate to forms of recreational activities," he wrote.

Facilitating the participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations, he said, should be done "without improvised ritual experiments and in full respect of the norms contained in the liturgical books which govern their conduct."

The faithful have a right to receive the Eucharist and worship the Lord present in the Eucharist "in the manner provided for, without limitations that go even beyond what is provided for by the norms of hygiene issued by public authorities or bishops."

The best way to avoid error, he wrote, is rooted in "obedience to the norms of the church, obedience to the bishops."

Any provisional norms established by the bishops and bishops' conferences must be obeyed, but they also should "expire when the situation returns to normal."

Advertisement