News

Jesuit Fr. John Piderit, San Francisco's archdiocesan vicar for administration, celebrates Mass s

Jesuit Fr. John Piderit, San Francisco's archdiocesan vicar for administration, celebrates Mass simultaneously with three other priests on the feast of the Assumption near the steps of the city's Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption Aug. 15. (CNS/San Francisco Archdiocese/Dennis Callahan)



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A virtual posada; vigils in the early afternoon; tickets for Mass — these are some of the ways dioceses are planning to celebrate the Nativity this year.

In most U.S. cities, COVID-19 restrictions will prevent Catholics from gathering for large cathedral Masses, but indoor, outdoor and livestreamed Masses are still being planned.

Brooklyn Diocese

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Brooklyn Diocese last month after the diocese objected to state regulations under coronavirus that limited church attendance. The court said that the state could not restrict religious institutions more than other entities such as retail stores.

With that legal victory, parishes are determined to celebrate Christmas this year safely, according to John Quaglione, a spokesman for the diocese, which includes the New York City boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn.

In the Brooklyn Diocese, Masses will be held indoors as they have been since June. Some churches are adding additional Christmas Masses to their schedules so they can serve more parishioners while maintaining adherence to social distancing rules, while others are instituting ticket systems for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Masses, Quaglione said.

At least two churches in the diocese are distributing limited numbers of physical tickets on a first-come, first-serve basis. At St. Anselm Church in the Bay Ridge section of Brooklyn, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day tickets are being distributed in the back of the church at the end of weekend Masses. Blessed Trinity Parish in Breezy Point, Queens, began ticket distribution on Wednesday Dec. 16, asking parishioners to call or stop by the rectory to pick them up.

The diocese's mandatory mask mandate remains in place, and there will be no sign of peace during Masses, Quaglione said. To make room in churches' schedules, the diocese will allow vigil Masses to start as early as 2 p.m.

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San Francisco Archdiocese

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone has criticized the state of California for banning indoor worship in counties where infection is widespread while allowing retail to continue. "This is precisely the kind of blatant discrimination to which the Supreme Court gave injunctive relief in New York," Cordileone said in a Nov. 28 statement.

Under California's Dec. 3 Regional Stay Home Order, indoor worship is among the activities banned in regions where intensive care units are filled to 85% capacity or greater. The state declared Dec. 16 that with the Bay Area region at just 12.9% ICU availability, the entire area would enter a three-week lockdown period starting Dec. 17.

With indoor worship prohibited, Cordileone will celebrate Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Masses on the plaza outside the Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption. Those Masses will also be livestreamed.

"You can have 200 people at [outdoor Masses], so that's a good option if the weather holds," said Jan Potts, an archdiocesan spokesperson. "In the past, the archbishop went beyond that capacity on the plaza, because the cathedral plaza is huge," Potts told NCR.

But she maintained that Cordileone is committed to COVID-19 safety measures. "He's strongly pushing — he's insisting, in fact, that the parishes abide by the safety guidelines like masking and maintaining distance," she said.

Like other dioceses, the Archdiocese of San Francisco is adjusting Christmas Mass times to meet restrictions. The Christmas eve midnight Mass will take place at 9 p.m. to comply with the city's new 10 p.m. curfew.

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone celebrates the White Mass and blessing for m

San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone celebrates the White Mass and blessing for medical professionals outside St. Augustine Church in South San Francisco Oct. 16. (CNS/Catholic San Francisco/Dennis Callahan)

Chicago Archdiocese

In a typical year, between 100 and 300 people would meet in the dark and cold of the early morning at the Broadview Detention Center to begin Chicago's annual Posada for Immigration Reform. Elena Segura started the tradition in 2006 to express solidarity with Chicago's undocumented community. This year the posada moved online.

In a traditional posada, two people representing Mary and Joseph lead processions in the days leading up to Christmas, being symbolically turned away from house after house before finally finding shelter in a church. "Posada is the story of Joseph and Mary seeking shelter in Bethlehem — they were migrants, worker migrants, seeking a place to stay," Segura said. When she conceived the Posada for Immigration Reform, Segura reflected on the question, "Who are the Marys and Josephs of these days?" Undocumented people stood out as the clear answer, she said.

The posada always starts at 7 a.m. on a Friday because that's the time when people are transferred out of Broadview, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center, Segura said. Mary and Joseph start by knocking on the doors of ICE, then process to the jail, stop at DePaul University, the Federal Plaza, and finally St. Peter's Church in the Loop, where the doors are open and they are at last welcome.

"It's very meaningful for both communities," Segura said. "The companions — the people who are in solidarity — and the undocumented people themselves."

This year's posada was livestreamed on Zoom Dec.18,with videos recorded at the five stops with this year's Mary and Joseph, followed by the praying of a rosary for immigration reform and protection of undocumented people.

Though the lay Catholics, priests and Sisters of Mercy who regularly participate in the posada were not be able to gather in person this year, Segura said earlier she believes the online event would be special because this year represents a unique invitation to companionship and understanding.

"Now everybody is in the same boat, because the undocumented community lives every day in uncertainty, and now God is calling us, everyone, to see that uncertainty," Segura said. "God is amplifying the invitation to solidarity."



Ivette Contreras, dressed as an angel, and Yazmin Diaz and Xavier Diaz, from St. Gall Parish in Chicago, portray Mary and Joseph during a Christmastime "posada" through the streets of Chicago Dec. 19, 2014. Catholic advocates for immigrants held the traditional re-enactment of Mary and Joseph's search for shelter as a time to pray for those about to be deported and to advocate for reforms in the U.S. immigration system. In 2020, the event was limited and live-streamed Dec. 18. (CNS/Catholic New World/Karen Callaway)

Diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota

South Dakota currently has the second-highest COVID-19 cases per capita of any state according to The New York Times. But the Diocese of Sioux Falls, which includes every part of the state east of the Missouri River, is essentially celebrating Christmas as usual, said interim communications director Renae Kranz.

"We don't limit capacity because South Dakota has not limited that at any time, and we have for several months had our [Sunday Mass] obligation back in place," Kranz told NCR.

When Bishop Donald DeGrood reinstated the obligation in August, he laid out COVID-19 guidelines for parishes, but social distancing requirements are being left to the discretion of individual pastors, and the guidelines say face masks should be offered at church entrances but are not required.

As in other dioceses, parishes in Sioux Falls will be able to start Christmas vigils as early as 2 p.m. so they can hold more Masses to accommodate greater numbers of attendees, Kranz said.

Atlanta Archdiocese

In Atlanta, Christmas Eve Mass will be livestreamed from the Cathedral of Christ the King in the evening and subsequently aired at midnight Eastern on FOX 5 Atlanta. "Archbishop [Gregory John] Hartmayer felt strongly that he wanted to bring the Mass to as many people as possible, and as wonderful and unifying as livestreaming has been, the reality is there are people who don't livestream," said Maureen Smith, an archdiocesan spokesperson.

Like other archdioceses, Atlanta has removed the usual restriction that vigils must start after 4 p.m. "Most parishes are having more Masses on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day than they otherwise would so that more people can attend," Smith said.

Current protocol states that attendees must wear masks and be spaced 6 feet apart, so Mass attendance capacities will depend on the space available at churches. Parishes in the archdiocese have celebrated outdoor Masses and parking lot Masses during the pandemic, Smith told NCR, some with the Mass broadcast over FM radio so that parishioners can stay in their cars to hear it.

Parishioner Lucy Alibutod sanitizes pews following Mass Nov. 22 at Immaculate Conception Pa

Parishioner Lucy Alibutod sanitizes pews following Mass Nov. 22 at Immaculate Conception Parish in Jamaica Estates, New York. The Passionist-run parish is located in the Diocese of Brooklyn. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Los Angeles Archdiocese

The Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles usually hosts about 3,000 people on Dec. 15 for a celebration marking the day before the start of Simbang Gabi, the Filipino novena celebrated during the nine days preceding Christmas. In a typical year, representatives from almost every parish in the archdiocese would participate in the procession of lanterns at the beginning of the event, said Fr. David Gallardo, the cathedral's pastor. This year people attended a livestreamed Simbang Gabi celebration instead.

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Masses will also be livestreamed from inside the cathedral this year, while socially distanced outdoor Masses will be held in the cathedral plaza with a seating capacity of up to 130 people.

"So far we haven't really had the problem of having more people than we can accommodate, so it's just first come, first serve," Gallardo said. "Right now in Los Angeles we're experiencing a [coronavirus] surge, so we've noticed a drop in our Sunday Mass attendance," he explained.

Individual churches will host livestreams and outdoor Masses, as well.

Archbishop José Horacio Gómez will allow priests to celebrate Christmas vigils as early as 2 p.m., Gallardo said. Gomez has also given priests special permission to celebrate up to four Masses on Christmas day.

"We've been trying to get all our parishes up to speed, and I believe that every one of our parishes now have technological capacity to livestream," archdiocesan vicar general Fr. Brian Nunes told NCR.

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