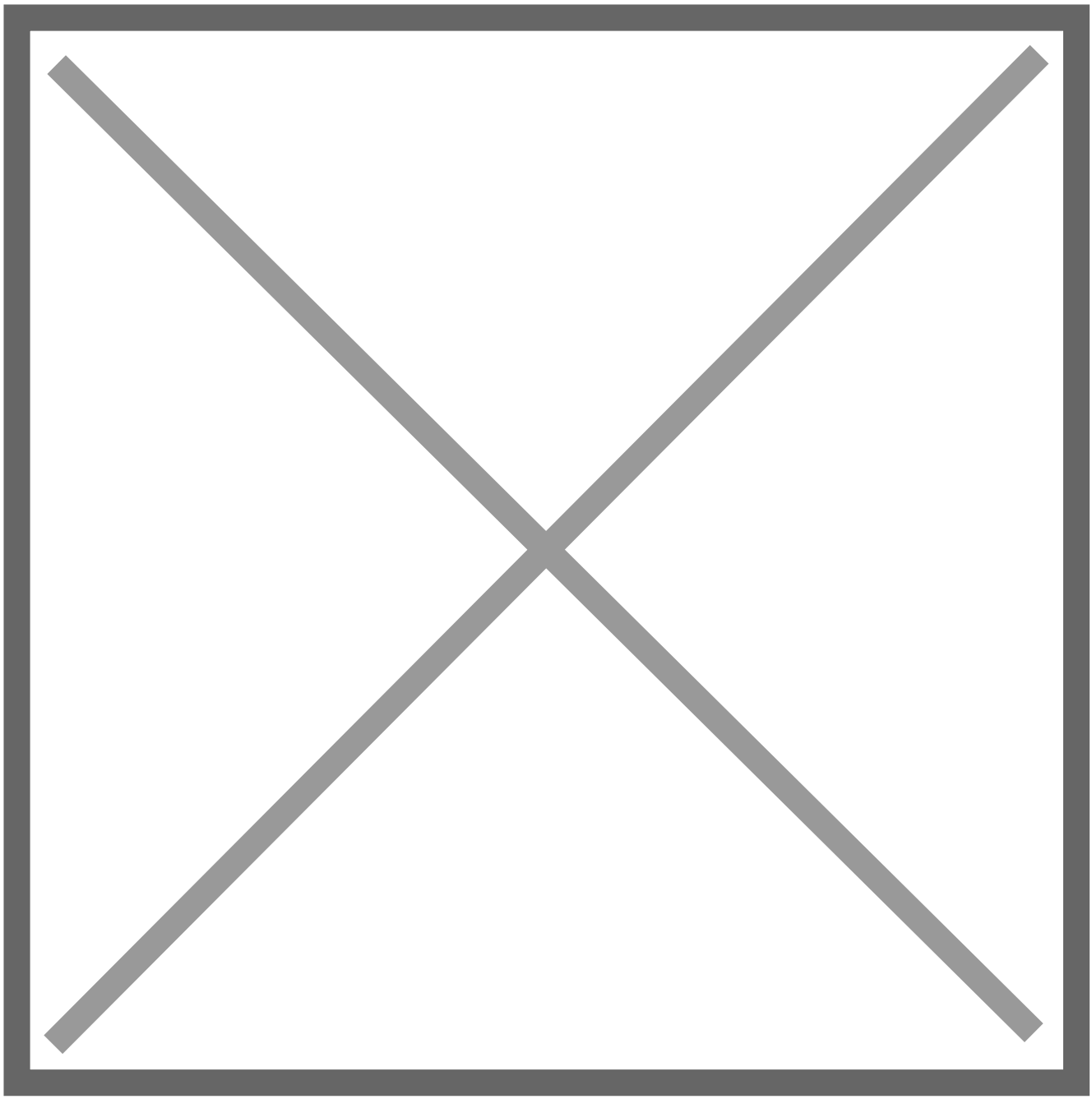
News



Catholics attend a special national Mass on the feast of St. Joseph at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles March 19, 2021, amid the coronavirus pandemic. Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was the celebrant. (CNS/Isabel Cacho/Courtesy Archdiocese of Los Angeles)



by Catholic News Service

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California's Catholic bishops "remain committed to the complete resumption of indoor worship in a responsible and safe manner," said an April 13 statement issued by the Executive Committee of the California Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the bishops.

The bishops also reiterated their earlier call for Catholics to get one of the COVID-19 vaccines if available to them so they can protect themselves, their family and the wider community, but noting: "One should always consult with their doctor regarding any personal medical concerns."

Their statement came a day after the state of California lifted its mandatory limits on indoor worship.

State officials said the new guidance was a response to several U.S. Supreme Court rulings striking down the mandates as a violation of the First Amendment's guarantee of the free exercise of religion.

In its most recent decision, the high court sided with a couple of pastors, members of a Bible study group and other plaintiffs in Santa Clara County, California, who sued Gov. Gavin Newsom and other state officials over restrictions on private gatherings at someone's home.

The rules limited such gatherings to people from only three households, with no more than 15 individuals allowed to attend — "including hosts and guests, children and adults."

To reduce the possible spread of COVID-19, only "the same three households" were allowed to gather for various events, which ruled out in-home worship for several members from the same faith community but from many different households.

Under its new guidelines, the California Department of Public Health still "strongly discouraged" indoor gatherings and suggested attendance should be limited to 25% of a building's capacity for the two-highest levels of the state's four-tier COVID-19 restrictions. It recommended a 50% capacity for the two lower levels — those areas with moderate to minimum spread of COVID-19.

"Since last March of 2020 — before many jurisdictions even began offering any guidelines for indoor activities — the dioceses of California upheld the need to protect life and public health by voluntarily suspending indoor worship services," the bishops said in their statement.

"As the pandemic dragged on through surges and plateaus," they said, "dioceses continued to stress the common good by voluntarily holding outdoor worship services and, only when safe, move some services indoors, but always with safety and health foremost."

"Pandemic-weary Californians are welcoming many positive developments in the struggle against COVID-19," they continued. "Cases appear to be stabilizing in the Golden State, those 16 years and older are or will soon be eligible for vaccination and continued diligence by the public on commonsense precautions are positive and hopeful signs."

However, they also noted vaccine availability "is still not consistent," especially for "some of the most vulnerable populations," and some people remain concerned about how the vaccines were tested and worry about reports that "new surges may be forming in some communities."

"Local conditions vary so much that in order to keep our people safe, we will calibrate decisions on numbers and location to the varying conditions in each diocese," the bishops said. "Our parishes will continue to insist on appropriate social distancing, mask wearing, hand washing and other basic and simple precautions."

In again encouraging Catholics to get vaccinated, they quoted a statement they issued in January: "Beyond simply protecting their own health and safety, Catholics also have an obligation to protect their family, friends and community by vaccinating

as soon as feasible in accordance with public health guidelines and protocols in their area."

"Catholics long to return to the celebration of holy Mass together safely and as one body of believers," the bishops said in closing. "After mostly staying apart for two celebrations of Christ's resurrection during Easter, God's call to us to gather again in prayer is especially strong.

"Fully celebrating together safely and as a community is a pressing priority of all California dioceses."

There are 12 Catholic dioceses in the state, which has a Catholic population of nearly 11 million.

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