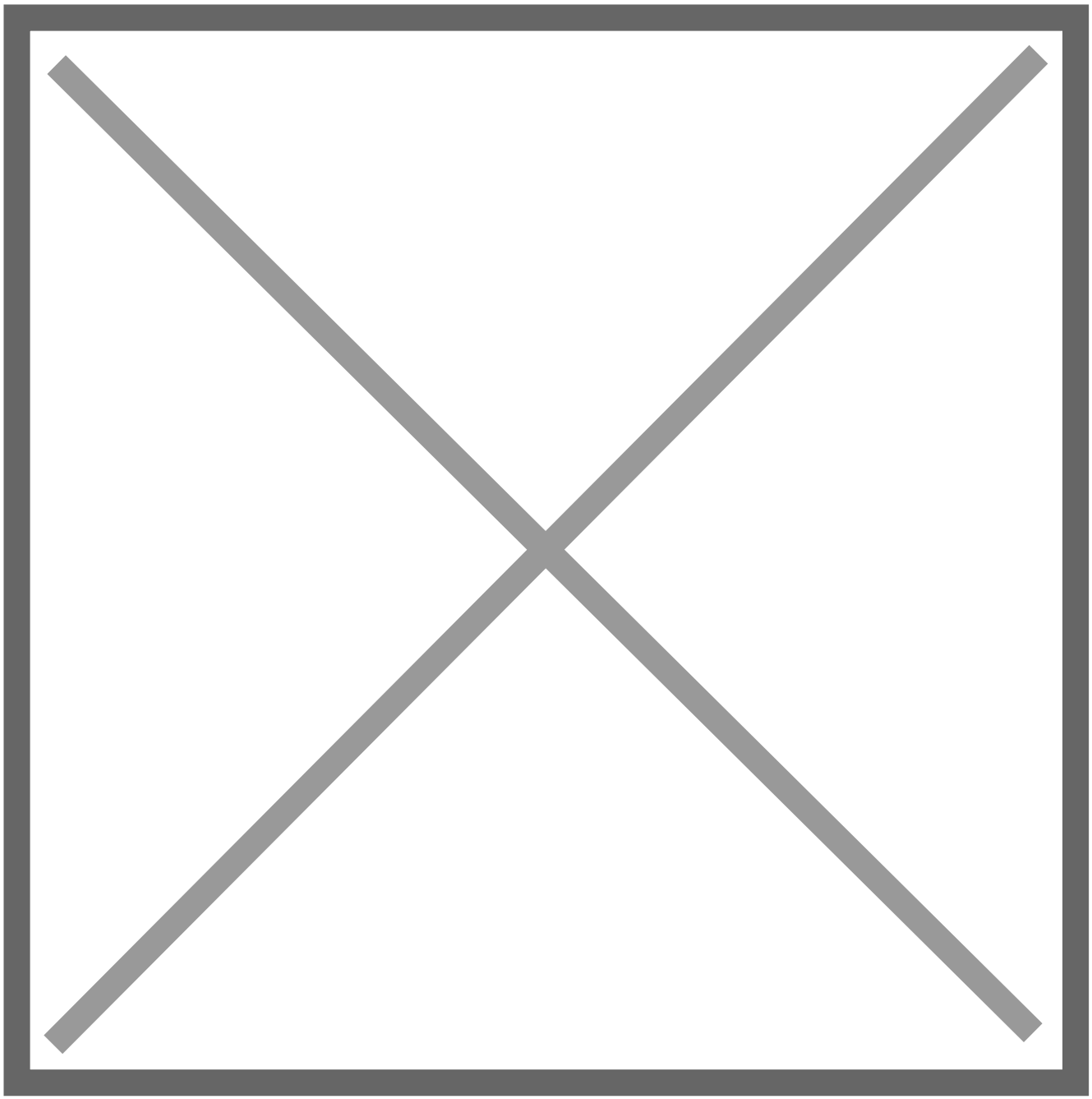
News



People pray during Mass at SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Atlanta Feb. 14, 2021, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Reuters/Chris Aluka Berry)



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Many Catholic dioceses and archdioceses across the country — which closed their parish doors for a time at the start of the pandemic last year and have gradually opened them to limited occupancy in the past year — are getting ready to fully reopen on the feast of Pentecost, May 23.

It's a day that traditionally marks the beginning of the church.

"Pentecost is the birthday of the church and a time when we should let the Holy Spirit guide our path. It is an appropriate time to take our next step forward to full reopening of our churches," said Atlanta Archbishop Gregory J. Hartmayer in a message to priests and parish and school leaders in late April.

The archbishop thanked the priests in the archdiocese for coming up with "ways to deliver the sacraments to your people during a dangerous global pandemic."

He also noted that many of them had to bury "too many" and also put themselves at risk to serve their parishioners.

But he pointed out that priests cannot bring the Eucharist to parishioners virtually, "not the way Jesus intended," and said now that vaccines are more available it is "time to begin to bring more people physically back to church."

Hartmayer said that on May 22, prior to the celebration of the vigil of Pentecost, the general dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass will expire. There will be exceptions for those who are ill, homebound, in a high-risk category, which includes those 65 or older, or for those who are afraid they will become ill by being in church.

The Diocese of Charlotte, North Carolina, also is reinstating the obligation for Catholics to attend Sunday Mass effective on Pentecost, also with exceptions for health and health concerns.

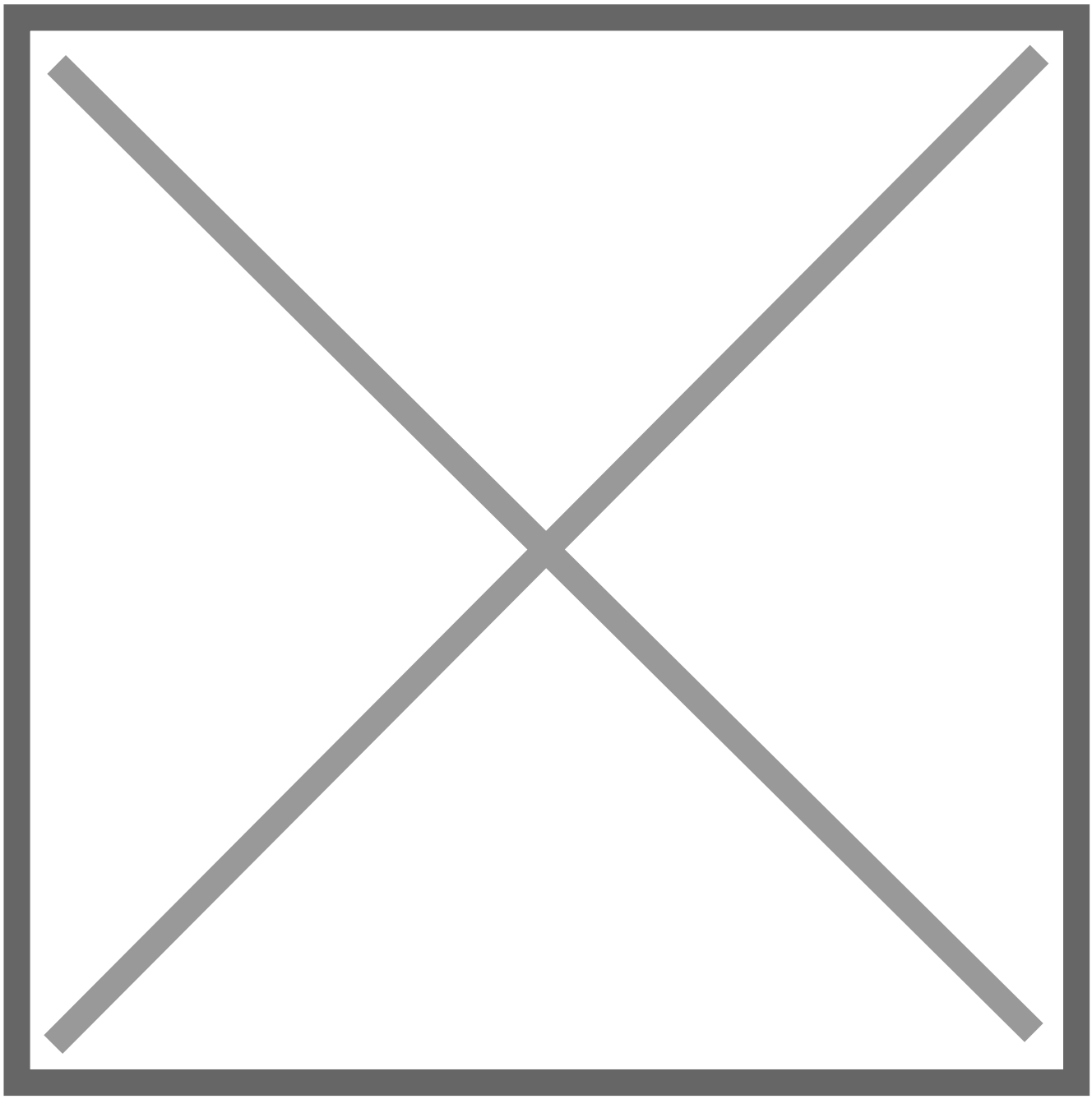
"It is important that we begin returning to Mass, when and where possible, in recognition of the essential and central nature of the Eucharist in our lives," the diocese said on its website.

The new guidelines pointed out that diocesan parishes had adapted to protect parishioners' health during the pandemic with safety precautions, capacity limits, rigorous cleaning protocols and of course livestreamed Masses, which filled a need but also were not a full replacement for attending Mass in-person.

"While livestreamed Masses have been a means to help us nourish our souls when we could not be physically present in church, we must remember that 'virtual' worship is not the norm. God did not come to us virtually. He came to us —and continues to come to us — in the flesh," it said.

"For us Catholics, unmediated contact with the real presence of the body and blood of Our Lord in offering this sacrifice to God the Father is irreplaceable and essential," the diocesan reopening guidelines pointed out.

In some areas, Catholic bishops have joined fellow bishops in the state to lift the dispensation of the obligation to attend Sunday Mass in person. Colorado bishops did this for Catholics effective on Pentecost, and Ohio bishops announced this for Catholics in the state, effective the weekend of June 5-6 for the feast of Corpus Christi June 6.



Deacon Peter Tonon distributes holy Communion in the parking lot of St. Ann Catholic Church in Charlotte, N.C., March 22, 2020, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS/Catholic News Herald/SueAnn Howell)

Other bishops similarly chose the June 6 date as the time to fully reopen. New Orleans Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond announced in a May 1 letter to archdiocesan Catholics that the obligation to attend Sunday Mass would be restored June 6 with exceptions for those who are homebound, sick or fearful of becoming sick.

"For those of us who have now begun to more frequently shop, socialize go to the gym and participate in other activities outside of our homes and have not yet returned to Mass, I encourage us in a special way to consider the Lord's invitation to 'come back to the table,'" he wrote.

He also noted the pandemic, for many, has been a "time of spiritual renewal, a deeper appreciation for the Mass and a desire to receive Christ in the Eucharist."

Some dioceses reopened their parishes last year and others have not completely done so but are loosening restrictions at Masses and preparing for Catholics to return.

Across the country as they open more fully, most parishes are continuing to livestream Masses, which they started doing at the beginning of the pandemic.

Starting on Pentecost, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington will resume its full "pre-pandemic" Sunday Mass schedule. It also will resume two daily Masses.

Msgr. Walter Rossi, basilica rector, said the District of Columbia's lifting of capacity restrictions for houses of worship effective May 21 was a perfect opportunity since it falls near Pentecost.

"We hope that as we seek to return to our normal operations without restriction, we will be able to better serve the faithful," he added.

For now, face masks must be worn at all times and social distancing measures will remain in effect at the basilica. Advance registration via the basilica's website is requested for those attending Masses on Sunday and holy days and for other special Masses.

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, where the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, remained in place in mid-May, with the archdiocese announcing May 13 that parishes would be relaxing some restrictions.

Archdiocesan parishes are now allowed to reduce social distancing in churches from 6 feet to 3 feet between congregants from different households. Face masks would not be required unless this is a requirement of the local jurisdiction, although masks were still encouraged for those who are not vaccinated. City parishes also could

increase their capacity from 33% to 50%.

"The Archdiocese of Baltimore is taking an incremental approach to increasing the capacity of our churches," the announcement said, after state guidelines for houses of worship were relaxed.

Msgr. Richard Hilgartner, pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Cockeysville, Maryland, said the parish will extend its capacity on the weekend of May 22-23.

"Let Pentecost Sunday be the new spirit and renewal," he said. He also noted that the parish has been conducting a four-week series of messages leading up to Pentecost to get people to recommit to involvement in the parish by participating in Mass, serving as a lector, catechist or in other ministries.

A parish event was planned for May 23 with ministries providing information about how to join or rejoin in their activities as they continue to pick up.

"We're hoping to build that momentum and get people ready for reengagement, with at least returning to Mass, if not more," the pastor said.

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Contributing to this report was Christopher Gunty in Baltimore, associate publisher/editor of Catholic Review Media, the media arm of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

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