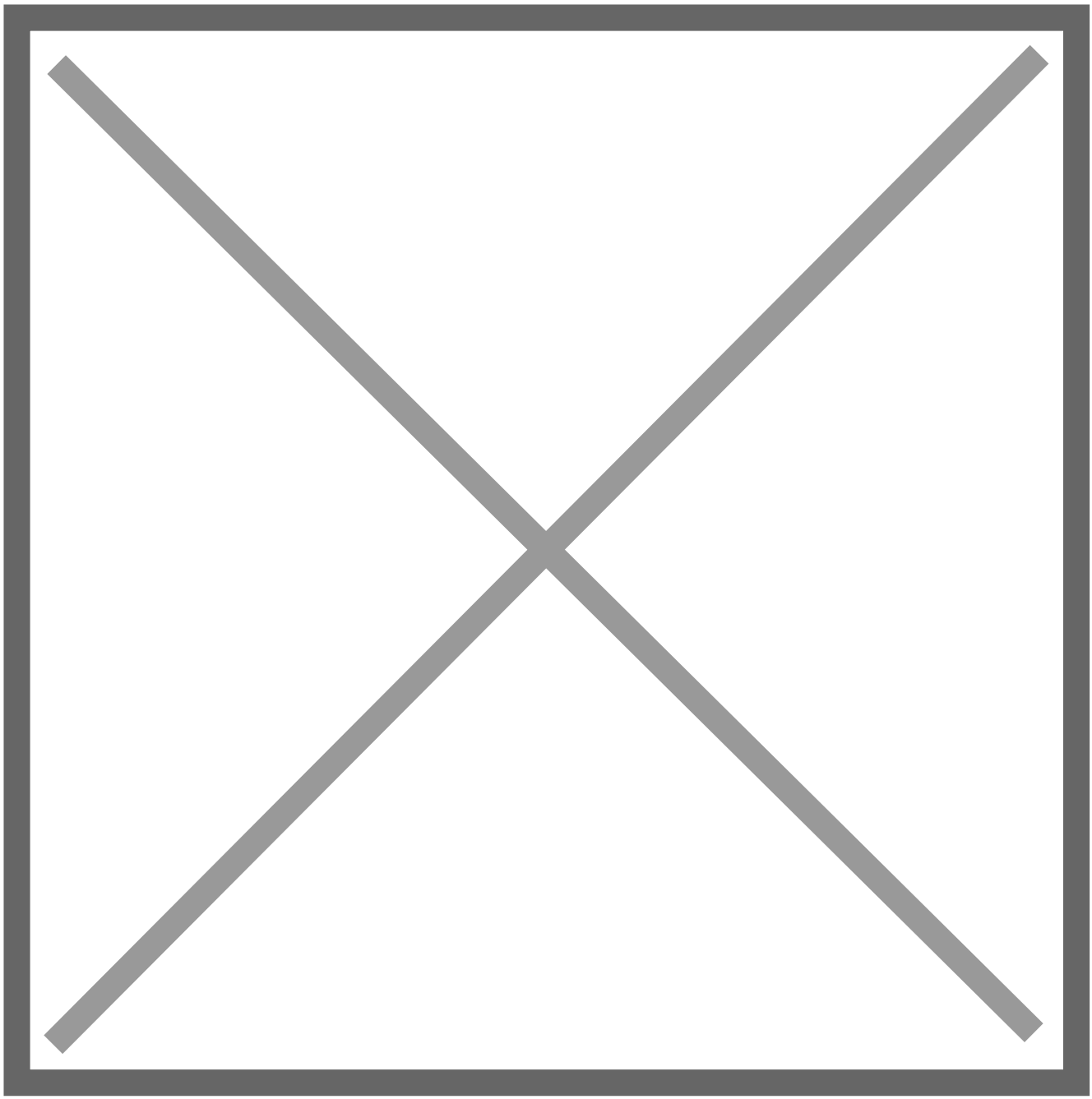
News



Six mid-Atlantic bishops are seen in this composite photo. On the top row are Washington Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory, left, Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori and Bishop Barry C. Knestout of Richmond, Va. On the bottom row are Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Arlington, Va., left, Bishop Mark E. Brennan of Wheeling-Charleston, W.Va., and newly retired Bishop W. Francis Malooly of Wilmington, Del., who is serving as the diocese's apostolic administrator until his successor is installed. (CNS composite/Photos by Jaclyn Lippelmann, Archdiocese of Washington;

Tyler Orsburn; Ian West, Diocese of Richmond; Bob Roller; Bob Roller; Paul Haring)

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Baltimore — June 2, 2021
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The bishops of the province of Baltimore and the Archdiocese of Washington announced June 2 they would be lifting the dispensation of the Sunday and holy day Mass obligation that was granted at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

A joint statement from Cardinal Wilton D. Gregory of Washington, Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori and the bishops of the dioceses of Arlington and Richmond, Virginia, Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia, and Wilmington, Delaware, said the obligation will be reinstated effective the weekend of June 26-27.

"We welcome and encourage the faithful to return to full in-person participation of the Sunday Eucharist, the source and summit of our Catholic faith," the statement said.

The bishops acknowledged the progress the country has made in curbing the coronavirus, including a decline in the number of new cases of COVID-19 as a result of safety protocols and the increase in the availability of vaccines to ward off the virus.

In addition to Lori and Gregory, the joint statement was signed by Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Arlington, Bishop Barry C. Knestout of Richmond, Bishop Mark E. Brennan of Wheeling-Charleston, and Bishop W. Francis Malooly, who retired as head of the Wilmington Diocese April 30 but is serving as the diocese's apostolic administrator until his successor's installation.

The bishops' statement said the obligation to return to Mass "does not apply to those who are ill; those who have reason to believe that they were recently exposed to the coronavirus, another serious or contagious illness; those who are confined to their home, a hospital or nursing facility; or those with serious underlying health conditions."

The statement also said, "One should consult his or her local pastor if questions arise about the obligation to attend Mass."

It added that safety protocols and other liturgical directives in each diocese remain in effect until modified or revoked by the respective diocesan bishop.

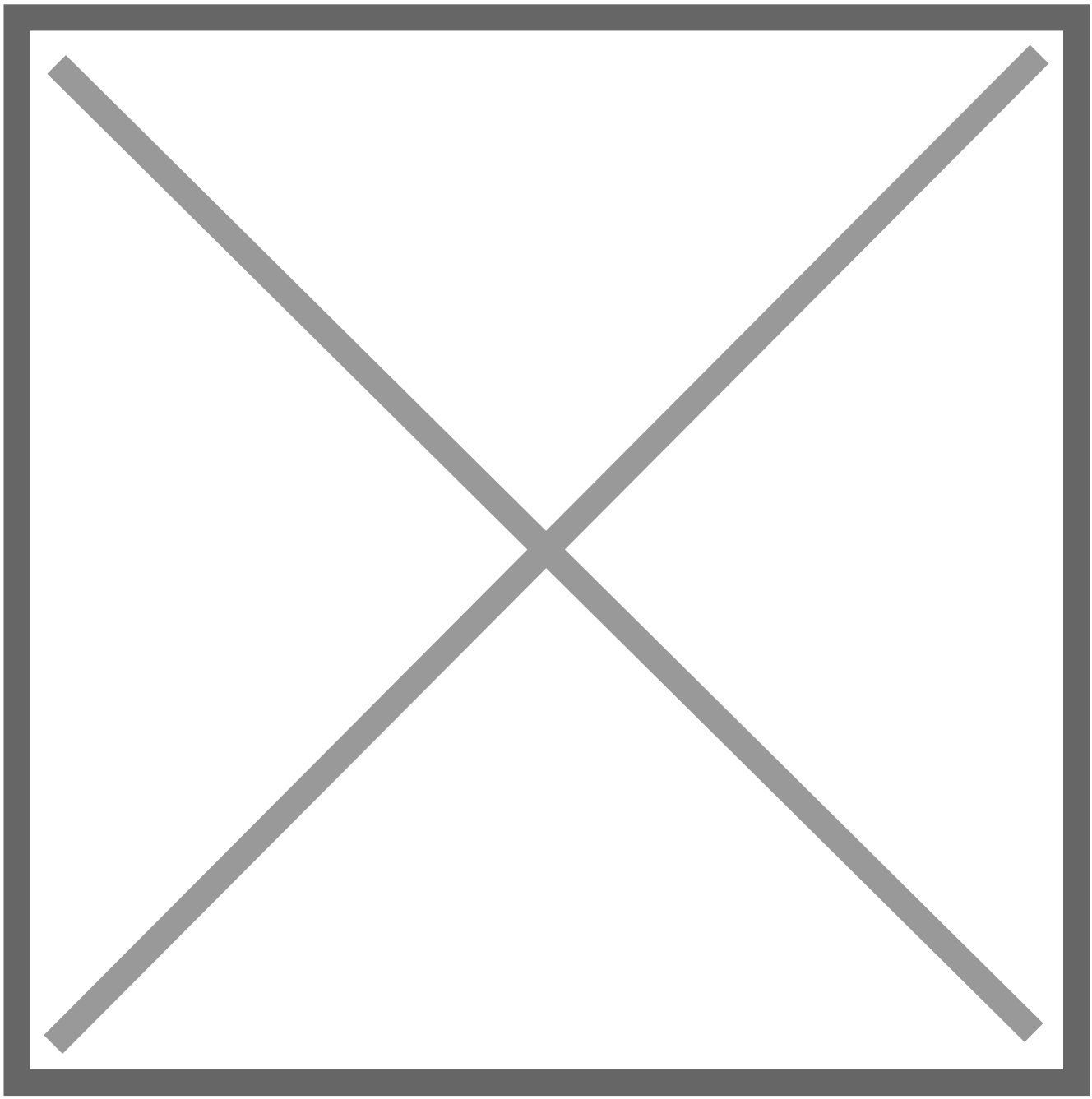
The Archdiocese of Baltimore announced in mid-May that it was taking an incremental approach to increasing the capacity of its churches, allowing parishes to reduce social distancing in churches from 6 feet to 3 feet between congregants from different households.

The archdiocese also said masks would not be required on parish campuses, unless required by the local jurisdiction.

"Wearing masks is still strongly encouraged for those who are not vaccinated," the May 15 announcement said.

In a message accompanying the release of the joint statement, Lori called it "a major milestone in our journey back to normalcy," and said the archdiocese would remove all COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, where jurisdictions allow that.

"The lifting of general dispensation and removing restrictions will both go into effect June 26 and 27. These are certainly joyous days ahead," the archbishop said.



People attend Easter Mass April 4, 2021, at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington. (CNS/Catholic Standard/Mihoko Owada)

He expressed his gratitude to the faithful for persevering through the challenges of more than 15 months of living with the pandemic and noted that the efforts have helped keep each other safe.

"It is with great hope that we look forward to an end to the pandemic and to the complete reopening of our parish communities for in-person worship. This is indeed a moment worthy of celebration and thanksgiving," he said.

He recalled those who have been directly affected by COVID-19, including those who lost loved ones, and encouraged continued prayers for them.

"In light of the continued decline in cases and in hospitalizations, as we progress beyond the long-present threat of COVID-19," Lori said, "I invite and encourage you to begin attending Mass in person again, confident that at this time, a return to our parish communities is safe for a vast majority of us."

Acknowledging that some people may still have concerns about attending Mass in person, Auxiliary Bishop Adam J. Parker of Baltimore, said: "Individuals with particular concerns about attending Mass, such as parents with unvaccinated children, should consult with their pastor, as per the joint statement."

As they resume in-person attendance at Mass, Lori invited the faithful to reaffirm the importance of the Eucharist in their lives, noting the archdiocese is launching a Year of the Eucharist on the feast of Corpus Christi, June 5-6.

"It has been a constant consolation to know that our parishes have worked tirelessly to make the celebration of the Mass accessible by various virtual means," the archbishop said.

"While most will continue to do so, I nonetheless encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to pursue a deeper encounter with our Lord through full and active in-person participation in the Mass," he added.

As of June 1, at nearly 48%, Maryland ranks ninth among states for percentage of the total population who are fully vaccinated, and 11th for those who have received at least one dose (57.2 %), according to Becker's Hospital Review, using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

According to the same report, the rankings among the states for the other jurisdictions and their percentages of those fully vaccinated and of those who have had at least one dose are as follows: District of Columbia — 13th, 46.2%, 12th, 57%; Virginia — 17th, 45%, 16th, 55.2%; Delaware — 21st, 43.2%, 19th, 54.6%; West Virginia — 40th, 34%, 43rd, 40.6%.

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Gunty is associate publisher/editor of Catholic Review Media, the media arm of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

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