News

Parishioners at St. Vincent de Paul Church in Wheeling, W.Va., wear masks during Mass Aug.

Parishioners at St. Vincent de Paul Church in Wheeling, W.Va., wear masks during Mass Aug. 28, 2021. (CNS photo/Colleen Rowan, The Catholic Spirit)



by Catholic News Service

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The rapid spread of the omicron variant of the coronavirus has led bishops in dioceses nationwide to reimpose mask mandates for students and staff at schools as well as for Mass attendees regardless of vaccination status.

Since mid-December, the mandates have been put in place in the archdioceses of Miami and Boston and all dioceses in New York and were to continue through mid-January.

In numerous other dioceses, bishops did not reinstate a mask mandate, but rather reiterated their encouragement so that parishioners wear face masks while attending Mass or other parish events.

Unlike at the start of the pandemic in early 2020, Mass schedules continued as usual although some parishes reinstituted social distancing requirements and some returned to sanitizing portions of church interiors between liturgies.

In Miami, archdiocesan leaders announced in early January that all students and staff at archdiocesan schools, as well as everyone attending Mass or other parish

events, would be required to wear a mask.

Schools Superintendent Jim Rigg announced the requirement in a Jan. 1 email, two days before classes resumed after the Christmas holiday break. Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski sent an email to archdiocesan priests Jan. 4 announcing his decision on masks.

"Given the rapid spread of the omicron variant of COVID, I ask you to resume requiring the use of face masks, even for the vaccinated, during the celebration of the liturgy and other parish functions as well as maintain proper social distancing," Archbishop Wenski wrote.

Effective the weekend of Nov. 5-6, 2021, the archbishop had relaxed the rules for Mass, allowing those who were vaccinated to forgo using a mask if they chose to do so. A similar protocol had been announced for archdiocesan elementary and secondary schools Nov. 15, 2021, with opt-out options added Nov. 30, 2021, based on parental request or consent.

The Jan. 1 announcement rescinded those opt-out options until Jan. 21. It noted that "conditions within the community will be monitored on a regular basis. This suspension may be extended, modified, or ended based on the circumstances in the community and the policy amended as needed."

The updated guidance comes after a substantial increase in positive cases for the coronavirus since mid-December.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the seven-day positivity rate in Florida had risen to nearly 25% in the weeks leading to Jan. 4. The rate for Miami-Dade County was nearly 28%, with cases increasing by 354% from the previous seven days; for Broward, the positivity rate sat at nearly 30%, with cases increasing by 400%; and for Monroe it was nearly 23%, with a 250% increase in cases.

Based on those numbers, the CDC rated the rate of community transmission as "high" and advised that "everyone should wear a mask in public, indoor settings."

"From my observations, most people have resumed (wearing masks) ever since the highly contagious omicron appeared," Archbishop Wenski wrote to the priests.

"Even if as some allege that masks are not totally effective, they do help," he said.

"Since the pandemic began in March 2020, we have said that the measures we have taken only mitigate but not eliminate the risk of infection. The research of the CDC has validated the benefit of masks with the N95 mask being the most effective," he added.

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The archbishop suggested that parishes might want to "have available at the door of the church a supply of masks to distribute to those who arrive without one."

In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul issued a directive Dec. 13 reinstating a mask mandate for all indoor gatherings, including religious services. The dioceses of Buffalo and Rockville Centre issued brief statements saying they would adhere to the requirement.

The statement from the Office of Communications in the Rockville Centre Diocese said that the masking requirement would apply to anyone participating in any activity on parish grounds.

The Buffalo Diocese's Office of Worship specifically noted the requirement applied to all liturgy participants "regardless of vaccination status."

"As in the past, the only exception given to this will be for clergy and other liturgical ministers when they are fulfilling a significant speaking role," the statement said, advising that they should remain at least six feet from others "during those limited occasions."

The policy was to remain in effect at least through Jan. 15.

In calling for masks to be worn at all Masses, Boston Cardinal Seán P. O'Malley said the step was to protect everyone participating in any liturgy. "Mass celebrants, deacons, readers, servers, choir members and instrumentalists should all wear masks except when they are speaking," the archdiocese's announcement said.

When it comes to singing, members of the congregation "should keep their masks on" although choir members would not be required to do so, the archdiocese added.

The mandate will remain in effect until Jan. 17.

In dioceses without a mask mandate, church leaders encouraged that masks be worn by people attending Mass or joining other activities.

Msgr. Steven P. Hurley, vicar general in the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware, said in an early January letter to priests that the next several weeks will be critical as health experts predicted coronavirus infection rates would continue to rise.

In guidance that returns some of the practices that were in place earlier in the pandemic to limit spread of COVID-19, he called on pastors to encourage all Mass attendees to be masked. All Massgoers older than 5 who are not vaccinated are now required to wear a mask, however.

The detailed correspondence also encouraged clergy and volunteers to obtain COVID-19 vaccines and boosters, suggested that nonliturgical activities and ministries be held virtually, asked parishes to consider social distancing during Mass and reminded clergy and extraordinary ministers of holy Communion to adhere to proper hand sanitizing.

Bishop David A. Zubik of Pittsburgh was among several bishops urging people to not let their guard down while attending Mass during the current massive surge in coronavirus cases despite their vaccination status.

In a Dec. 31 announcement, he also suspended the practice of extending a sign of peace at Mass until further notice and said the distribution of holy Communion would continue to be limited to bread.

"As we mark the end of 2021 and look with hope to a new year filled with God's continued blessings, please join me in praying for an end to the spread of COVID-19 and for health and happiness for all," Bishop Zubik said.

While Pima County, Arizona, officials in mid-December reinstated a mask mandate for indoor activities, such a requirement was not put in place in the Diocese of Tucson. Still, Bishop Edward J. Weisenburger, urged pastors Dec. 22 "to encourage their parishioners to make use of face masks and social distance for all parish activities and public worship" as the omicron variant spreads and hospitalizations rise.

"Christianity has always acknowledged a balance between individual rights and the rights of the community," he said in his announcement. "At this critical juncture in history we must do all that we can for the health and well-being of the community."