

Swine flu prompts changes in Mass practices

Jackie Taylor Catholic News Service | May. 1, 2009



A statue of St. Jude, patron of desperate situations, is seen with a surgical mask outside San Hipolito Church in Mexico City April 28. (CNS/Jorge Dan, Reuters)

As the number of swine influenza cases increases around the world, some U.S. bishops are suggesting ways that pastors can alter certain practices within the celebration of Mass in an effort to prevent the spread of the highly contagious virus.

The swine flu is transmitted when an infected person coughs or sneezes around others. It can also be spread when a person touches a surface contaminated with the virus and then touches his or her eyes, nose or mouth.

Parishes in the Diocese of Austin, Texas, are not to "offer the blood of Christ at Eucharist until more is known about the virus," according to a letter from Bishop Gregory M. Aymond.

"It seems that having the public drink from the chalice may be an unnecessary risk," Bishop Aymond said.

Bishop Aymond further instructed ministers of Communion to always have clean hands when handling and distributing the Eucharist.

In the Diocese of Dallas, Bishop Kevin J. Farrell also asked pastors to "consider suspending in your parish the reception of the holy Eucharist under both species." In the letter, Bishop Farrell reminded pastors and ministers of holy Communion to maintain proper hygiene when handling the Eucharist.

Father Michael Dugan, director of the Office of Liturgy for the Diocese of Dallas, reminded parishioners of their obligation to attend Mass on Sunday. If a parishioner is sick, however, Father Dugan recommended that he or she stay home to avoid spreading the illness.

Father Dugan also said that "members of our congregations should not be offended at this time if someone chooses not to shake the other person's hand at the sign of peace."

"If you are ill, the appropriate response to someone extending a sign of peace might be to bow to them and say,

'Peace be with you,' to avoid bodily contact, or one might wave slightly at the other person," he added in the online statement.

Father Dugan also suggested that parishioners who feel sick should receive Communion in their hands and avoid drinking from the communal chalice.

Similar to measures suggested by other diocesan bishops, parishes in the Diocese of Green Bay, Wis., reminded those who are sick that they should refrain from shaking hands during the sign of peace and should not receive the blood of Christ from the cup.

In a letter to the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Archbishop Jose H. Gomez stressed that while "this is a time for prudence and reasonable concern, it is not a time for panic."

Archbishop Gomez recommended that parishes only offer the host at Communion. He also said parishioners should not hold hands or shake hands during the celebration of Mass.

The letter assured parishioners that "in a health-threatening situation there is not an obligation to attend Mass."

While no cases of swine flu have been reported in Hawaii, the Diocese of Honolulu released a memo in response to the "heightened crisis" regarding swine flu. It discouraged any contact among parishioners during Mass, especially during the sign of peace and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

Parishes can still offer Communion under both species, but the memo encouraged those who feel ill not to drink from the cup.

The memo also stated, "Those in parish and diocesan ministries and those employed by parishes, schools and the diocese are discouraged from traveling to Mexico."

Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria, Ill., urged priests in his diocese to "pay careful attention as this situation develops," while also "avoiding any semblance of panic." He asked that "a nod of the head or a smile" temporarily replace the traditional "handshakes or embraces" at the sign of peace. He also said parishioners should not hold hands during the Lord's Prayer.

The letter ordered the distribution of the blood of Christ to be suspended throughout the diocese.

Pastors should ensure ministers of Communion "wash their hands before the Communion rite and all vessels should be properly sanitized after ritual purification," said Bishop Jenky.

Bishop Salvatore R. Matano of Burlington, Vt., encouraged similar measures in his state, which had not had any cases of swine flu as of April 30. He said Catholics "should be encouraged to thank God, by faithful attendance at holy Mass, that we have been spared thus far from this influenza and to pray for those afflicted by this illness and for all public health officials as they guide us in eradicating this threat."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Divine Worship posted on its Web site a list of questions and answers associated with how the church should modify the celebration of the liturgy as a result of the outbreak of swine flu.

In previous times of influenza outbreak, bishops have altered liturgical practices such as the distribution of Communion and the exchange of the sign of peace to avoid the spread of contagion, the document noted.

To limit the spread of the swine flu virus, the Secretariat of Divine Worship advised priests, deacons and extraordinary ministers of Communion "to use an alcohol-based anti-bacterial solution before and after

distributing holy Communion."

Ministers and pastors should also ask parishioners not to receive from the cup if they feel ill, it said.

Individual bishops may decide whether they feel it is necessary to change such practices during the celebration of the liturgy within their diocese. However, the Secretariat of Divine Worship does not believe that widespread liturgical adaptations are necessary at this time to prevent the spread of the swine flu.

The Secretariat of Divine Worship has asked that diocesan offices provide any available information about local conditions regarding illness and the influenza outbreak.

Symptoms of the swine flu are similar to those of the common flu and include fever, runny nose, sore throat, body aches, fatigue, lack of appetite, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

Continuously updated information about the swine influenza virus is available online from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>.

(Contributing to this story was Patricia Kasten in Green Bay.)

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