

# Covid-19 and the Archdiocese of Toronto

## Frequently Asked Questions - December 4, 2020



Archdiocese  
of Toronto

We share the frustration of all those who are struggling with the current restrictions on places of worship, especially in lockdown regions identified by the Province of Ontario.

In response to numerous inquiries at both the archdiocesan and parish level, we have compiled answers to frequently asked questions so that the faithful of the Archdiocese of Toronto may have access to complete and accurate information.

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### **1. What has the Archdiocese of Toronto been doing to advocate for churches during this period of pandemic?**

The Archdiocese of Toronto has been directly engaged in conversations with provincial, municipal and public health officials since the original “lockdown” in March 2020. From March to June, our archdiocese, working in partnership with all Catholic dioceses in Ontario, enlisted medical and legal experts to collaboratively develop the “WorshipSafe” protocols that are in use in Catholic churches throughout Ontario.

This WorshipSafe plan demonstrated to government officials, medical experts and parishioners that we were ready with a safe and clear procedure, allowing us to responsibly re-open churches. Catholic dioceses did not wait for the government to develop a plan. In fact, we proactively approached the government with our WorshipSafe protocols and other recommendations. Most of these recommendations were accepted and our WorshipSafe protocols have been used by other faith communities in preparing their own health and safety guidelines.

Since the first lockdown, the archdiocese has remained in dialogue each week with

provincial and municipal officials to hear their perspective and to express our point-of-view, highlighting that our ministry and outreach are essential, especially in this time of pandemic. Cardinal Collins has proactively engaged in conversations with political leaders and local medical officers of health. The celebration of the Mass and the sacraments is vital for Catholic Christians, and not only gives them spiritual strength to deal personally with this crisis, but also strengthens them to reach out to help others. Physical sickness is an obvious element of our present affliction, but spiritual and psychological trauma is also being experienced by everyone affected by the pandemic, and religious communities are there to sustain all who suffer so grievously. Any deprivation of the sacraments is devastating, but especially if it is extended, and particularly when it is clear that our parishes are both ready and able to operate safely. The Eucharist especially is the breath of life for us; for a good reason, we can hold our breath, but not for long.

The political leaders in our province, and the public health officials who advise them, and who are directly responsible for fighting the spread of the virus, are acting out of a desire to save lives. They are not intentionally seeking to limit religious freedom.

As Christians, we also share the desire to protect and love our neighbours in the midst of the pandemic, and we co-operate with reasonable public health requirements in order to care for the common good. We appreciate the desire of public officials to do the maximum to fight the virus and protect us all. But any limitation of religious gatherings, especially when it causes even a temporary deprivation of the sacraments, must be justified by a proportionate need, and evidence that there is legitimate cause for public health concern in such activities.

## **2. Have Catholic churches in the Archdiocese of Toronto been a source for community transmission of Covid-19?**

No. There is no evidence that has been presented to us that Catholic churches in the archdiocese have been a source of community transmission. Since our re-opening in June, with attendance of more than 1.5 million, we have experienced an extremely small number of positive cases (less than 50). To our knowledge, none of these cases have been directly traced back to the church as the origin of transmission.

## **3. If Catholic churches haven't been a problem, why did the government impose restrictions?**

On November 20 2020, the Province of Ontario, in consultation with the Chief Medical Officer of the Province, introduced severe restrictions in regions where Covid-19 cases have increased significantly in recent weeks. These measures are intended to limit the potential spread of the virus and to keep Ontarians safe.

Understandably, medical experts are concerned about the potential for transmission at any large gathering,

including religious gatherings. Some of the government's current restrictions can be fairly criticized by people of goodwill. However, our approach throughout this pandemic has been to respect the direction of the medical and political authorities as part of our broader mission to protect the community and one another. While recognizing the good intentions of those seeking vigorously to fight a rapidly spreading virus that causes great harm, we believe that a focus on situations in which the virus clearly is actively spread is wiser than a more general effort that causes the collateral damage of preventing the reception of the life-giving sacraments which give strength to so many in this great crisis.

## **4. Why isn't the church doing more to push back against these restrictions?**

The Archdiocese of Toronto is in conversation, at least weekly, with elected officials, medical officers of health and others with extensive experience in pandemic transmission. We continue to advocate for the opening and safe operation of our churches, pointing to the protocols and safe environment fostered since our doors opened once again in June.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford acknowledged in his remarks during a November 20, 2020 press conference that his caucus debated the restrictions on places of worship at great length. There is no evidence that there has been an intentional desire to suppress religious freedom. There are strong feelings on all sides of this issue. One thing is certain: if we can collectively work to reduce the number of Covid-19 cases, we will return to full worship without restrictions much sooner.

At a time when the archdiocese is actively speaking out against the expansion of euthanasia and advocating for greater access to palliative care, we clearly will not take actions that would endanger the lives of the vulnerable or overburden the medical system.

As Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto, shared in a public letter in May 2020:

*While it makes sense for all citizens to follow the reasonable restrictions that have been imposed to contain the virus, for Christians doing so is also a matter of faith, charity and justice. After all, these are some of the stars we steer by:*

1. *"Am I my brother's keeper?" Yes, we are responsible for others. In justice, as well as charity, we have no right recklessly to endanger others, or to cause their death.*
2. *"Thou shalt not kill."*
3. *"Love your neighbour as yourself."*

Those who attend church may also visit loved ones in long-term care facilities or spend time with a relative with a compromised immune system. How would any one of us feel if we were to transmit the virus to someone who then succumbed to Covid-19? In short, we must make every effort to combat a pandemic that has taken the lives of 12,000 Canadians and a half million people worldwide. This is why we have such strict protocols in place when we worship.

These strict WorshipSafe protocols (masks, sanitizing, physical distancing, etc.) also include elements which cause great distress to many Catholics. For example, for the duration of the pandemic, we do not allow communion on the tongue. This is because medical authorities sensibly point out that when we are in the midst of a pandemic in which the virus is largely transmitted through the nose and mouth, it is not safe

for the priest to place his hand in close proximity to the nose and mouth of each communicant.

## **5. Why did you cancel Masses in lockdown areas?**

Places of worship in lockdown regions are restricted to no more than 10 persons inside the building. On November 20, Cardinal Collins asked parishes that have the ability to do so, to remain open for private prayer, Eucharistic Adoration and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Of course, even when there is no public Mass, priests continue to celebrate private Mass each day for the intentions of the faithful and for those suffering from Covid-19. In addition, close to one hundred parishes livestream Sunday services, some with daily Mass.

*"I am deeply disappointed that, in some regions of the archdiocese, we must restrict participation in the sacraments. This will inflict a great spiritual pain upon those who safely and with great dedication have been drawing spiritual strength to sustain them, and to help them to serve those suffering in this pandemic."*

*- Cardinal Collins  
November 20, 2020*

Offering public Masses when the civil authorities set a limit of only 10 people (in practice, that would mean 8 or 9 parishioners) creates numerous challenges to do so in a fair manner: many parishes in the affected regions have daily Mass attendance approaching 100 people or more, and several hundred worshippers attending Sunday Masses. The challenge in allowing only eight or nine people to attend Mass are significant, if we are to be fair to all. Who is permitted to attend? How does one deal with the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> person wishing to attend? For nine or fewer people, online reservation systems are not practical nor equitable.

While some priests may wish to offer multiple Masses, many of the same challenges still remain, and it is also not reasonable to expect our clergy, especially our older priests, to sustain this effort over a period of many weeks.

## **6. I wish to contact my local Member of Provincial Parliament to express my concerns.**

Parishioners are welcome to respectfully contact their Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) to express their concerns about the restrictions currently in place. You can find contact information for your MPP by visiting: [www.ola.org/en/members](http://www.ola.org/en/members).

## **7. How do I stay updated on the latest communication from the Archdiocese?**

You can visit [www.archtoronto.org/covid19](http://www.archtoronto.org/covid19) - click on [statements](#) for the latest news or to subscribe to periodic updates from the Archdiocese of Toronto. You can also follow our social media accounts – be sure to stay connected with your [local parish](#) by contacting them or visiting their website or other communication channels.

## **Thank you for your patience!**

This is an extremely difficult and challenging time for all of us. During this Advent season, let us pray for one another, to dialogue in charity and kindness, to remember those who are sick and serving on the front lines of this pandemic, to reflect the face of Jesus to all those whom we encounter.

Our faith remains our most powerful source of strength and comfort through these very difficult days of pandemic. May God continue to bless you and your loved ones!