



DIocese of Baton Rouge
BISHOP'S OFFICE
POST OFFICE BOX 2028
BATON ROUGE, LA 70821-2028
TELEPHONE 225-242-0247 FAX 225-336-8768

October 30, 2009

TO THE CLERGY, RELIGIOUS AND FAITHFUL
OF THE DIOCESE OF BATON ROUGE:

In recent months, the issue of public health has been heightened by the occurrence in some places of the H1N1 virus. While this virus has impacted some places in the country more than others, there is widespread worry about infection and the spread of the virus. As this influenza virus affects varied areas of public life, such as the workplace and some schools, there could also be some concern for those who engage in public worship.

I have been monitoring the situation with the help of the Bishop's Committee on Divine Worship [www.usccb.org/liturgy] which in turn has been following the directives given by the National Centers for Disease Control [www.cdc.gov] in Atlanta. Both your pastors and I have been attentive to these resources.

With this in mind, I would ask the following of all of you in the Diocese of Baton Rouge: *Please use the common sense precautions which help impede the spreading of infections, such as frequently washing your hands and, if coughing or sneezing, doing so into a disposable facial tissue or handkerchief, and not your hands. These practices can help lessen the threat of spreading germs.*

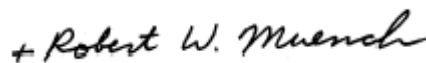
More specifically, when we worship in our diocese, I would ask the following:

1. Pastors are to direct ministers of Holy Communion in each parish to take these precautions before they are to serve at Mass: to wash their hands before Mass begins, and use antibacterial hand washing aides as needed. The same is to be done after Communion is distributed, once Mass is completed. This is not to distract the praying congregation and so is best done out of public view. There should not be a new ritual created to take these precautions in a common sense manner.
2. **If you are a person displaying influenza symptoms**, please do the following:
 - a. The obligation to attend Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation is the ordinary expectation of Catholics. Extraordinary circumstances such as sickness, travel or severe weather excuse the faithful from this obligation. **If you are not feeling well**, especially during this time of concern about "the flu," **please stay at home** and do not risk spreading infection to others. If you are sick at home, and if your local provider offers the diocesan Catholic Life television channel, you may be able to participate by praying with the televised liturgy from the Cathedral each Sunday morning as well as daily Masses. You can also request that your parish provide Holy Communion to you as part of its normal pastoral care of the sick.

- b. **Please refrain** from receiving from the Holy Communion Cup or from receiving the consecrated Host on the tongue.
 - c. **Minimize physical touch with others.** True, physical touch at Catholic liturgy is a natural expression and sign of our human and divine communion. The Sign of Christ's peace is a required part of the Mass, but the method of extending it has variations. In the United States, the handshake has become the customary way of doing this. Yet persons with flu symptoms should refrain from offering a handshake to express Christ's peace. During this time of health concern, a person may instead offer the verbal greeting, "The peace of Christ be with you" accompanied by a nod of the head.
 - d. While not a part of the Catholic liturgy, in some communities it has been common for the congregation to hold hands during the Our Father. A local pastor may determine that it would be best to advise this customary practice to be suspended.
3. In the Diocese of Baton Rouge, offering Chalice of the consecrated Blood of Christ at Holy Communion is *expected* whenever possible at every Mass [*cf.* the 2009 *Pagella and Policies* of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, p. 83]. This is an important expression of Catholic faith, and the sign value is not to be taken lightly. Offering and receiving Holy Communion under both forms allows the fullness of the sign of our Communion in Christ to be expressed. However, during this time of heightened health concern because of the H1N1 virus, in some parishes, for some or all of the parish Masses, a local pastor may deem it necessary, *with permission from Father Than Vu, Vicar General, or me*, to suspend the offering of the Precious Blood of Christ to the congregation. I would allow this to be the case for a reasonable length of time until the health worry about possible H1N1 contagion has lessened or ceased. After that time, it is expected that the Holy Communion Cup will be restored to the congregation as *the* usual manner of offering Holy Communion.
 4. While not denying the reality of disease or how disease is spread, it is important for us to remember that there will always remain a certain *risk* that comes with taking part in public worship. It is not possible for us to live in a germ-free society. From getting out of the car, opening the door of the church, touching the pew, holding the hymnal, etc., we encounter risk. Perhaps this is a chief reason why we come to worship. *In a time of history, when things in life around us can seem so uncertain, we turn to the One who is certain, faithful and present whenever we gather to worship.*

If there are any other changes necessitated at this time, I will communicate these to you. If you have any specific questions, please address them to Father Tom Ranzino, Director of the diocesan Office of Worship.

Sincerely in our Lord,



Robert W. Muench
Bishop of Baton Rouge