



OFFICE *of the* BISHOP

March 29, 2021

Dear Friends in Christ,

I write to communicate some imminent and incremental adjustments of our COVID mitigation policies. Beginning April 1st, our social distancing policies will be adjusted so that every pew may be used for seating. Households are still asked to observe social distancing between other households within each pew, and when possible between pews. Additionally, baptismal fonts and holy water fonts may be refilled after the Easter Vigil, and scholas of four-five singers at safe distance from the congregation are now permitted.

These adjustments are in response to our improving public health situation (which includes declining hospitalizations, a low percentage of positive COVID tests, and the increased vaccination rate). The adjustments are also a part of an incremental approach that will unfold over time. This approach allows us to respond to positive developments and yet remain vigilant, knowing that we have not yet emerged from this pandemic. Currently, two particularly concerning unknowns are the virulence of new strains of COVID-19, and the impact of spring break travel. **Because of this reality, while we are relaxing the above practices, we are also extending the mask requirement for the foreseeable future; as the unknown factors are manifested, it will again be reviewed. With the exception of the three adjustments noted above, all other mitigation practices remain in place.**

These adjustments have been made based on the input of our diocesan priests, consultation with our regathering team, and most importantly, in consultation with local medical experts. The latter have helped us discern the proper timing and ordering of relaxations. I hope that adjusting our social distancing practices will alleviate some challenges related to Easter, even as adjusting with short notice creates others. While we permit the use of additional pews within our church spaces, we strongly encourage families and others to practice social distancing with the pews, and between pews when possible.

Our Diocese is monitoring the public health situation on a daily basis, and if conditions continue to remain stable or improve, relaxations will continue in an incremental way. Alternatively, if the conditions significantly deteriorate, we may find it necessary to reinstate previous guidelines.

While the public health situation offers many signs of hope, it is also clear that the pandemic is still a present reality. May we remain vigilant in our mitigation strategies such as using masks, good hand hygiene, and staying home when we feel ill or have been exposed to COVID-19. I recognize that the pandemic has left many of us feeling weary and frustrated. As we enter into Holy Week, let us seek the face of Jesus as he completes the mission the Father has entrusted to him; he empties himself on the cross in perfect freedom and draws us to the in-breaking light and life of the Resurrection.

Let us continue to pray for one another. May this Holy Week deepen the bonds among us in faith, charity, and spiritual unity.

Faithfully in Christ,

Most Rev. William M. Joensen, Ph.D.
Bishop of Des Moines