Q&A 6/3/20

Q1: What part should music play as we re-open the churches for public worship?

A1: As we first re-open the churches, singing (chanting) will not be permitted, either by a choir, a solo cantor, the assembly, or the presider. The prohibition is in place both to decrease the volume of respiratory droplets and aerosol created, and to keep the time together as short as possible. Instrumental music is allowed (except for brass and woodwinds).

What kind of instrumental music? Some have expressed a concern that if a familiar tune is chosen, some in the assembly may start to sing along. It is up to parishes to decide what is best (and possible) in their community. We don’t want to encourage singing, and we also want to make sure that the instrumental music does not prolong the liturgy.

SINGING IN STEPS 1 and 2

As Dr. Anthony Fauci mentioned in a recent interview with America magazine (https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/05/27/dr-anthony-fauci-catholic-churches-masks-communion-covid-coronavirus), singing at this point ought to be avoided. “When you sing, the amount of droplets and aerosol that come out is really, in some respects, scary.” And the distances these particle travel is much further.

Droplets and aerosols are the particles that we expel when we breathe, talk, cough or sneeze, and sing. The louder we are, the more particles we generate. Larger droplets tend to fall within six feet of us (though that’s not an absolute number; there’s no magic force field six feet away), and can be stopped (at least to some degree) by wearing a cloth face covering. One small study showed that these masks can stop the droplets we make when we talk; singing has not been studied. Aerosol particles are much smaller; so much so that we can breathe them directly into our lungs. Regular masks are not made to stop aerosols (though they may stop these smaller particles to some degree); that’s what N95 respirators are for.

In other words, our interventions work in layers. Don’t make more droplets/aerosols than you need (by breathing and talking), block them at their source as much as we can (wear a mask), and be together for as little time as possible.

SINGING IN STEP 3

According to the guidance that we’ve put together, if we get to Step Three (evidence that we are between waves), we begin to allow the use of a cantor to lead singing, with a few restrictions—all aimed at keeping the spread of the droplets and aerosols we make down:

First, we only sing the responses and acclamations; we avoid hymns, because they are longer. Please note that it is not intended that the cantor replace the community.

Second, we all still wear masks and sing softly. That limits the production of and the force with which we expel these particles.

Finally, a choir is not used and woodwinds and brass instruments are avoided because of the volume of particles they would generate. Any benefit they would bring are far outweighed by the risks.

Why these restrictions? Because even if there is no evidence that the virus is spreading widely in the community, it is still present. Singing is still a risk, especially when it comes to spread by aerosol.
The question of the degree to which aerosol spread plays a part in COVID-19 is still not fully understood. It may be that research will determine that it plays a small role, and that singing once there is no community spread would be a reasonable risk to take. Or we may find the opposite, in which case we will need to change our guidance. While research is leaning in the latter direction, we will have to wait and see.

Q2: Are there any recommendations about cleaning and disinfecting pews? I don’t want to damage them.

A2: All surfaces should be cleaned (soap and water; let dry 5 minutes) and disinfected (using an approved disinfectant; list found at https://www.epa.gov/pesticide-registration/list-n-disinfectants-use-against-sars-cov-2).

For wood pews, Sauder Manufacturing recommends using Clorox® Disinfecting Wipes EPA Reg. No. 5813-79 (active ingredient is quaternary ammonium) on their products. They note that alcohol (including the alcohol in hand sanitizer) can be damaging. Therefore, those using hand sanitizer need to be careful to let their hands dry completely before touching the pew. Before you select a product, make sure you test it on your surfaces. If possible, call the manufacturer for advice.

For upholstered pews, recommendations vary by manufacturer. Lysol Disinfectant Spray is often listed, as are bleach solutions, hydrogen peroxide and quaternary ammonium products. The best approach is to use a wipe or moistened towel on a section of the fabric; if the color of the fabric is transferred to the cloth, then it ought not be used. If possible, call the manufacturer for advice.

For more information: http://www.sauderworship.com/blog/2020/05/29/recommendations-for-cleaning-disinfecting-pews-auditorium-products/.

Q3: What should we be doing about our HVAC system?


In summary, an enclosed building with limited ventilation to the outside makes transmission easier. Increasing the circulation of outdoor air as much as possible—by opening windows and doors—is recommended.

Make sure your HVAC is in good working order and, when first re-opening the building, make sure there is no problem with mold. If you can increase the percentage of outdoor air in your HVAC system, rather than recirculating it, do so as much as possible. Increase the filtration in your system as much as possible, and using other methods (such as UV in the ducts or portable HEPA fans/filters).

Q4: How does the pastor/usher prevent people from coming into Mass when the church is open but the allotted number is already present? What should happen if someone starts repeatedly coughing or sneezing?

A4: These are important questions that each parish will need to figure out for themselves. Obviously, much depends on making sure that parishioners are well-informed regarding what is expected of them, and that staff and volunteers are well-prepared for their ministry. Some thoughts to consider:

No matter what reservation system you use, consider setting aside some pews for those who may arrive without having reserved a place; and ask those with reservations to be at church by 5 minutes before
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the start of the liturgy. Some churches ask those without reservations to wait, and then seat them if any spaces remain right before Mass begins.

Of course, once the limit is reached, you will need to turn people away. So far, in dioceses that have opened, this has not been an issue. But, if necessary, hospitality ministers should be prepared to deal with those refusing to leave as they would with any disturbance.

The same would apply to someone who is experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. On the one hand, we ought not over-react; not every cough or sneeze is due to the virus! One would hope that parishioners would be mindful of their sisters and brothers and stay home if there was any concern. On the other, if someone appears to be ill, they should be attended to as any ill parishioner. In our policy, we recommend that each parish have a room or location where someone who has fallen ill may be safely isolated.

Q5: How is the communion procession envisioned? How is exiting the church envisioned? How will the collection be handled?

A5: All these questions are answered in our policy, available at:

Obviously, the final shape that a communion procession will take will depend on the shape and size of the church. Some things to consider: Dismissing people by pew, in order to keep six-foot distances. Placing the ministers so there is one-way traffic in aisles. Perhaps having ministers in the back of the church as well as in the front. Locating hand-sanitizer next to the minister in case it is needed.

Another option to consider, if the space between pews is wide enough, is to have the assembly stay in their places and the ministers move to them. They can then make their way to each communicant via the empty row in front of them. This may be easier in newer churches with wider spaces. Of course, ministers will need to carry hand sanitizer with them.

Dismissal at the end of Mass should also be by pew, beginning at the back. That will help keep proper distances between people and prevent groups “bunching up” by exits. Use as many exits as possible to ease traffic flow.

There is no collection, or procession with the bread and wine. It is preferred that monetary gifts be given electronically. Churches may consider placing a receptacle near entrances for donations, but be aware of the security concerns this raises.

Q6: How can we host social gatherings or receptions at this time?

A6: Parishes halls do not have the same resources that professional establishments have when it comes to maintaining the level of safety and hygiene needed during this pandemic. Therefore, during Step Two, no social gatherings or receptions are permitted indoors. If distances are maintained and masks worn, outdoor gatherings are permitted. However, no food may be served (households can bring their own food and drink). Once we get to Step Three, the same is allowed indoors, with social distancing and a time limit of 60 minutes.
Q7: What are the seating limits in churches?

A7: We are asking, in Step Two, that every third pew be used. There should be 6 feet between household groups in the same pew. When we get to Step Three, parishes can use every other pew.