



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA 26003

May 14, 2021

Dear clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston,

As I mentioned in my pastoral letter released yesterday, developments regarding COVID-19 protocols continue to happen in a fast and furious manner. We learned later on Thursday that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) announced its updated guidelines which state that “fully vaccinated people can resume activities without wearing a mask or physically distancing, except where required by federal, state, local, tribal or territorial laws, rules, and regulations, including local business and workplace guidance.”

Moreover, Governor Jim Justice just announced early this afternoon that the State of West Virginia will lift the face covering requirements for people who have been fully vaccinated; the governor stated very clearly: “This is for those [individuals] that are fully vaccinated, which means you have had both of your shots, other than if you’ve taken the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, and if you are two weeks out from the last dose.” Moreover, the Governor noted that the state’s mask mandate would still apply to those who are not fully vaccinated until June 20.

Given the CDC’s updated information and the Governor’s lifting of the face covering mandate, the Diocese will immediately adjust its protocols accordingly. For those individuals who are fully vaccinated as described above, you will no longer need to wear masks to attend liturgical celebrations, meetings or other functions within diocesan facilities (Catholic Charities West Virginia [CCWVa], hospitals or other health care facilities may still require more stringent regulations). Moreover, the CDC’s guidelines also state that vaccinated people do not need to allow for physical distancing any longer.

Our parishes and institutions need to be accommodating to these various scenarios and respect those who have been vaccinated and no longer wish to wear a mask, those who have been vaccinated but have other conditions that cause them to still want to wear a mask and observe some distancing, and those who have not been vaccinated and must adhere to “the honor system” and continue to wear a mask to protect themselves and others. I still urge all people who have not yet been vaccinated to cooperate for everyone’s good and to get fully vaccinated as soon as possible.

As of this writing, we have not received information from the Governor’s Office regarding his prior directive requiring churches to use only every other pew. The Diocese will continue to reach out to the Governor’s Office for further clarity on this matter; however, until we receive updated information, I ask that our parishes continue to follow the current practice of only using every other pew – this will allow some distancing for parishioners who may feel uncomfortable being in large gatherings as well it will permit appropriate distancing options for those who are

not fully vaccinated. We still want to do all that we can to ensure that all of our people can feel comfortable and gather safely for Masses and other events.

I know that many are excited that this day has finally arrived and that, for those fully vaccinated, life may begin to return to some resemblance of pre-pandemic times. However, I still ask for everyone's cooperation in caring for one's own health/safety and that of your neighbor's as well – washing/sanitizing one's hands on a regular basis is an easy way to help prevent the spread of germs. Moreover, we are excited to welcome back all of our parishioners. For those who haven't been attending Mass in person, we have indeed missed you and our parish communities are not the same without you; we look forward to seeing you now and in the weeks to come. Please pray for areas in our world where the pandemic rages on and is still inflicting so much pain and suffering. Let us also commend those in the medical community who tirelessly offer themselves to care for the needs of others.

Invoking the intercession of our Blessed Mother and St. Joseph, I ask that God continue to bless all of you, your families and parishes and our great Mountain State.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mark E. Brennan".

+Mark E. Brennan
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston