

Liturgy and the Flu

Here are some common-sense liturgical practices to help everyone stay healthy and to care for one another during flu season and throughout the year.

How is the influenza virus transmitted?

According to the Centers for Disease Control, influenza viruses are spread when a person who has the flu coughs, sneezes, or speaks and spreads the virus into the air, and other people inhale the virus. The viruses can also be spread when a person touches a surface with flu viruses on it (for example, a door handle) and then touches his or her nose or mouth. Adults with the flu virus may be contagious from one day before developing symptoms to up to seven days after getting sick. Children can be contagious for longer than seven days.

How can the spread of the influenza virus be prevented?

The single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each fall. It is also helpful to avoid close contact with people who are sick. Stay home when you are sick.

If you are sick, take care of yourself.

We care for the Body of Christ by first taking care of our own body. The obligation to participate in Mass is not required for those who are sick.

If you are sick, do not worsen your illness by trying to get to church, and do not put others at risk of catching your illness. It is not sinful to miss Mass if you are sick; it is an act of charity.

If your children are sick, keep them home from Mass, religious education, or youth ministry meetings.

If you are seriously ill, the Church wants to celebrate with you the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. You can arrange for this by contacting your parish office.

Don't cough or sneeze into your hands.

Use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze, then throw it away. If you don't have a tissue handy, do what school children are taught to do: cough or sneeze into your shirt sleeve and avoid touching the area of fabric you coughed into.

Wash your hands often, especially if you are a greeter, usher, or Communion minister.

Soap, water, and a good scrubbing are the best defense against the cold and flu viruses. Scrub your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If you are not near soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer or disposable hand wipe. Keep a small bottle or packet in your purse or pocket.

Avoid shaking hands with others before, during, and after Mass if you are sick or have been in direct contact with someone who is sick.

At the Sign of Peace, you can offer a smile or a wave or a simple bow of the head to those around you. If you have come in direct contact with someone who has been sneezing or coughing, avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with your hands until you can wash them. This is a good practice at any time since germs can spread when we touch our eyes, nose, or mouth.

Respect should be given to individuals who refrain from sharing a handshake at the Sign of Peace. This is at the discretion of each individual person.

Refrain from receiving Communion on the tongue or from the Cup if you are sick.

When receiving the Eucharist, we receive the fullness of the Body and Blood of Christ under the species of bread alone or wine alone. The sign of Communion is more complete when receiving under both kinds, but receiving both is not required.

If you are accustomed to receiving Communion on the tongue, you will prevent spreading your saliva to the hand of the Communion minister by receiving Communion in the hand during times of flu outbreaks or when you or someone in your household has been sick.

Should distribution from the Cup be suspended?

For the sake of caution, the bishop or the pastor of a particular parish may choose to suspend temporarily the distribution of the Blood of Christ at the Eucharist in order to prevent the spread of disease during the time of a flu outbreak.

If Communion ministers need to clean their hands during Mass, do this discretely.

All ministers of Holy Communion, both ordinary and extraordinary, should wash their hands with soap and water before and after Mass.

Then, if Communion ministers have practiced good hygiene during the Mass, there is no obligation for them to wash their hands again during Mass. But if Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion need to wash their hands during Mass, the best way is to clean their hands in their pew, using a sanitizing liquid or antibacterial wipe, after the Sign of Peace and just before they come to the sanctuary.

The action of sanitizing their hands should be done in such a way as not to delay the Communion Rite or distract from the focus at the altar.

What if the priest is sick?

If the priest is sick, it's best that he not preside at the Mass. However, if this is not possible and he must preside while he is sick, the duty of distributing Communion to the assembly can be done by other ordinary ministers: assisting deacons and concelebrants at the Mass. If these are not available, the presiding priest may temporarily refrain from distributing Communion to the assembly in order to prevent the spread of disease, allowing the extraordinary ministers to be the ones to distribute Communion to the assembly.

Keep the holy water fonts clean.

On a regular basis, holy water from the fonts at church entrances should be disposed of appropriately, and the containers should be washed, dried, and sanitized with disinfectant before being refilled.

Visiting the sick:

All ministers of Holy Communion who visit nursing homes, hospitals, and private homes should wash their hands with soap and water before and after they make their rounds. Between patients they should use hand sanitizer.

Pray for the sick.

Especially during cold and flu season, remember to pray for those who are sick, for their caregivers, for those who have died because of sickness, and especially for those who suffer with no one to care for them.

This advisory from the Diocese of Austin includes some information from publications of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Diocese of San Jose.