



Dear Saint Francis Xavier parishioners and visitors,

Following the first known case of COVID-19 in the United States that was discovered in January 2020, this illness has taken the lives of over 580,000 Americans. Seeking to protect the health and the lives of those living in our region, the Catholic Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama offered a dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass beginning in March 2020. Over the past 14 months, the number of new COVID-19 cases in Alabama rose to over 2500 per day in July 2020 and peaked at over 6000 cases per day in January 2021. Since then, the number of new cases has fallen dramatically with 79 new cases on May 10, 2021.

This decline in new cases is likely due to widespread vaccination, especially among those over 65 years of age, careful attention to physical separation, frequent hand washing, and wearing of face masks. At this moment, 36% of Americans are fully vaccinated with 46% having received at least one dose. Among adults over 65 years of age, over 70% have been fully vaccinated and the FDA has just approved the Pfizer vaccine for children ages 12-15. On May 13, the Centers for Disease Control issued guidance regarding wearing of facemasks indicating that facemasks should continue to be worn for those who have not been fully vaccinated (at least 2 weeks after the last dose) while face masks are optional for those who have been fully vaccinated.

In response to the declining rate of infection and the widespread longing to receive Our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, Bishop Raica has decided to end the dispensation from attending Sunday Mass following Pentecost Sunday on May 24, 2021. And while we rejoice at the improving rates of infection, we are committed to ensuring that those attending Mass at St Francis Xavier will be comfortable as we cautiously begin to reopen our church to greater numbers of parishioners and visitors. We fully appreciate that some parishioners will be most comfortable with continued physical distancing and we expect that all parishioners will continue to wear face masks in accordance with CDC guidance as we gradually transition back to more normal liturgical practices.

To respect all our brothers and sisters in Christ while gradually implementing the Diocesan plans for reopening, we plan the following initial changes:

- 1) The center sections of pews (both right and left sides) will remain with ropes to limit seating to every other pew. This will allow those who are more comfortable seating with physical distancing to continue sitting in this arrangement.
- 2) The left and right sides of the church will have the ropes removed to allow seating in every pew. Those who are comfortable sitting together as before the pandemic may choose to sit in this section.

- 3) The Eucharist will continue to be offered under one species at this time.
- 4) Face masks should be worn by those who have not been fully vaccinated (at least 2 weeks after the last dose). Face masks can be considered optional for those who have been fully vaccinated, taking in mind the sensitivities of our brothers and sisters in Christ who are near us. Thus, we will all need to be sensitive and accommodating to one another.
- 5) The priest, deacon, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion will continue to wear face masks during distribution of Communion.
- 6) We encourage parishioners to receive Communion on the hand; however, for those who prefer to receive Communion on the tongue, waiting to approach the minister of Communion near the end of the Communion line may be most respectful of the sensitivities of our more cautious parishioners.
- 7) Drive-through Communion will continue for now as some parishioners remain reluctant to return to Mass in person.
- 8) Streaming of Masses will continue as this has been a widely appreciated ministry, especially to our homebound parishioners.
- 9) The worship aids, including missalettes, will be returned to the pews. These can be used in a manner that each parishioner feels comfortable.
- 10) Holy water will be returned to the Baptismal Font at the entrance to the nave of the church. In addition, the gifts to be consecrated during the Eucharistic Prayer will be processed to the altar.

We are committed to the safety of all those who gather for liturgies at Saint Francis Xavier parish. We take seriously our obligation to consider the common good of all people. This year has been designated the Year of the Parish and the Eucharist by Bishop Raica. Our parish is attempting to fully reopen in a cautious and responsible manner so that we can fully celebrate this special year. Beginning in September 2021, we plan to resume the many parish activities we have suspended, including Adult Education, the Parish School of Religion, Children's Liturgy of the Word, the Nursery, the many social groups that have enhanced all of our lives, and we will resume the music program with the parish choir. As we reopen our parish, we look forward to seeing you and to hearing any suggestions that you have so that all parishioners feel safe, comfortable, and can worship in the fullness of Faith.

Hope and Joy,

Fr Joe Culotta
Sister Janet Marie Flemming
Molly Knerl

Fr Brad Jantz
Deacon Neal Kay

Effective May 29, 2021- The Solemnity of The Holy Trinity