



Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland

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DATE: March 23, 2021

TO: Pastors/Administrator; Parish Catechetical Leaders; Youth Ministry Coordinators; RCIA Coordinators; Pastoral Life Coordinators; Priests

FROM: Lori Dahlhoff, EdD, Director of Lifelong Faith Formation 

RE: **Updated Diocesan Guidelines for Faith Formation during the Pandemic**

Thank you for your care, commitment, creativity, and flexibility throughout the pandemic in remaining connected to the adults, teens, and children in your parish and offering meaningful opportunities to grow in faith. Vaccinations are a positive development that gives us hope we are growing closer to larger in-person gatherings with closer interactions between people. However, the more contagious variants and 100+ daily new positive cases of COVID-19 indicate that **we need to continue following safety and distancing protocols through at least the summer.** Those are included as appendices to this memo. **Highlighted below are six areas of special consideration for current offerings as well as in your planning for summer and fall.**

Hybrid Approach: Continue offering hybrid options of in-person with virtual options for sacramental preparation and faith formation. Consider scheduling gathered summer programs like vacation bible school in late July or August as conditions are likely to be safer for having more people interacting more closely by then.

Capacity Limits: As of March 26, parishes may host in-person gatherings with a maximum of 50 individuals or 50% indoor capacity or 100 individuals or 75% for outdoors, whichever is higher, as long as physical distance of 6 feet can be maintained between households and participants wear face coverings throughout the time gathered. This includes faith formation sessions and liturgies. The governor anticipates increasing capacity limits May 23 to 75% indoors, 100% outdoors.

Physical Spacing and Food: Given that parish groups meet infrequently, we will continue to keep 6-foot distance between people in faith formation until the state CDC determines we have sufficient vaccinations and other conditions that reduces the 6-foot guideline for being in public together. This also means parishes cannot yet host overnight events where individuals from different households sleep in the same room/space. Do not share food before, during, or after events.

Self-Check before Participating: Staff, volunteers, and participants – whether or not they have been fully vaccinated - are still asked to complete the self-check before coming to a parish event. You can find an updated version [online](#) or at the end of this memo. The only change is the states exempt from post-travel quarantines.

Out-of-State Business Travel: The diocesan ban on out-of-state business travel remains in place. Thus, parishes should not organize or sponsor summer programs that involve out of state travel for teens or adults.

Vaccinations: Staff, volunteers, and participants are not required to be vaccinated to participate in parish programs. At the same time, [Bishop Deeley](#) joins [Pope Francis](#) and [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) encouraging people get vaccinated as an ethical act of charity for the common good. The Vatican developed a resource kit for church leaders you can find [here](#). You can also find the latest CDC guidelines for those fully vaccinated [here](#)

As always, please contact the staff of the Office of Lifelong Faith Formation if you have questions or need assistance. Mary, Comforter of the Afflicted, pray for us. St Joseph, protector of the Holy Family, pray for us.

Appendix A: Faith Formation Priorities During the Pandemic

Focus faith formation efforts on four priorities:

1. **Connections between adults, youth, and children in the parish**
2. **Sacramental experience and formation**
3. **Circle of Grace safe environment training**
4. **Flexible, hybrid models for instruction/ongoing catechesis.**

Continue limiting on-site faith formation gatherings, events, and activities to only those that can maintain safe physical distancing, support proper hand hygiene, and limit sharing of materials that can contribute to community spread of the novel coronavirus.

1. **Connections between adults, youth, and children in the parish:** human interactions are key to community life and personal wellness; both are vital to knowing and living the Catholic faith
 - a. Offer opportunities for households enrolled in faith formation, youth ministry, or sacramental preparation to physically be together, ideally at least once a month.
 - b. Facilitate two-way communication between parishioners, reaching out as sisters and brothers to listen to their experiences as well as share faith with one another.
 - c. Provide formation for current and potential catechists as a means of adult faith formation.
2. **Sacramental experience and formation (including RCIA):** encourage participation in the sacramental life of the parish to the extent a person/family's risk factors allow
 - a. Follow regular expectations for sacramental preparation, adjusting in-person gatherings to comply with current safety protocols and available resources.
 - b. Consider smaller groups and more ceremonies to allow for the capacity restrictions of available spaces and any limits on the group sizes for gatherings.
3. **Circle of Grace safe environment training:** parishes and Catholic schools have the same expectations regarding providing the annual Circle of Grace sessions for minors if you offer *any* form of formal faith formation program for children, whether in-person or virtual.
 - a. The curriculum is ideally taught in person. In addition to the program being relationship-based, children who are in high-risk situations at home will have a safe place to learn at the parish or school.
 - b. If in-person training is not possible, sessions can be taught live on a virtual platform like the meeting app Lifesize but should not be pre-recorded.
4. **Flexible, hybrid models for instruction/ongoing catechesis (including RCIA):**
 - a. Offer in-person gatherings for children's faith formation less frequently than weekly – perhaps bi-weekly or monthly – to lessen the burden on families who must follow face covering and physical distancing in other areas of their lives.
 - b. Always provide distance learning options for those who do not want to physically come together, especially for critical programs like sacramental preparation and family retreats
 - c. Follow best practices for virtual gatherings, especially with minors (see Appendix C)
 - d. Provide suggestions for self-directed learning at home as well as formal activities organized by the parish.
 - e. Remember parents are not usually trained teachers so design any home-based expectations to build on the natural strengths of family life rather than turn the home into a mini classroom.

APPENDIX B: Necessary safety measures to minimize transmission of the virus causing COVID-19

The following is subject to change and is under regular review to protect the health and safety of parishioners, staff, volunteers, and the wider community.

The following activities are still not permitted due to risks from close interactions among people from different households:

- Children’s Liturgy of the Word
- Nursery or enclosed cry rooms during mass or faith formation programs
- Overnight activities where participants from different households sleep in the same enclosed space
- Transporting people outside of one’s household

Program coordinators in consultation with their pastors will alter programmatic activities to reflect current recommendations for physical distancing and group size, promote healthy hygiene practices, consider high-risk populations, ensure appropriate physical distancing, and limit sharing. They must also follow the diocese’s basic protocols for opening buildings for public mass, office operations, and on-site gatherings. (See current [parish meeting guidelines](#))

- Consider all possible gathering spaces and furnishing in your parish beyond those used in the past to identify safe and available spaces for formation, including space available outside, and ways to increase ventilation by opening windows the weather permits
- Focus on activities that require less group contact — this includes altering typical activities to reduce transmission risk
 - Appropriate face coverings must be worn when meeting indoors as well as in all public places, including when outside where might encounter other people, for instance in parking lots
 - Alter activities or games that typically involve people from different households touching one another or passing objects to one another
 - Minimize singing or shouting
 - Be mindful that the longer the activity, the greater the risk of potential exposure; anything longer than 15 minutes moves toward “close contact” in terms of potential virus spread
- Limit the total number of people gathered at the site to no more than the number allowed by state at the time of the gathering (As of March 26, 2021 50 people maximum or 50% indoors; 100 people or 75% outdoors) including staff and volunteers
 - Limit the number of people in a small group to no more than 10, especially if gathering in an enclosed room
 - Keep the people in small groups consistent, i.e. do not change the mix of participants or leaders throughout the activity/session
 - When small groups come together, keep groups separated from one another by 6 feet with all participants wearing face coverings
 - Restrict nonessential visitors, volunteers, and activities involving other groups at the same time
- Maintain 6 feet distance between participants who do not live in the same household
 - Require staff (paid and volunteer) and participants to wear cloth face coverings when [age, activity, and developmentally appropriate](#) and to practice good hand hygiene with frequent handwashing, especially between contact with other individuals and contact with shared items
 - Plan for accommodating inclement weather that will not allow for outdoor activities or might impact drop-off or pick-up procedures
- Eliminate eating in any gathering under 2 hours. If you must have snacks or meals:
 - Design meals or snacks so there are no shared utensils or self-service food or drink areas
 - Close common dining spaces or stagger use and disinfect between groups
 - Consider having participants bring own snacks or lunches (including own utensils and napkins)

- If food is offered, have pre-packaged boxes or bags for each attendee instead of a buffet or family-style meal
- Face coverings may only be removed to eat or drink if a person is seated and has no or minimal conversation with mask off.
- Limit access to vending machines since these are common touch points that would need frequent disinfecting
- Limit sharing of materials (art supplies, books, equipment, desks, etc)
 - Provide supplies for use by a single participant throughout the activity or limit use to one small group at a time then clean and disinfect between groups
 - Avoid sharing electronic devices, toys, books, and other games or learning aids
 - Limit what participants bring from home
- Plan for how to monitor protocol implementation throughout activities and what to do in case of a participant becomes ill during a session or testing positive for COVID-19 within 2 weeks of the gathering
 - Maintain confidential list of participants with contact information [following diocesan guidelines of record-keeping to assist with contact tracing in the event of exposure to COVID-19](#)
- Provide educational materials and safety measures in advance to participants/families prior to gathering so all are aware and able to come together safely (See sample poster in Appendix D or [online](#))
 - People with fever or respiratory or GI symptoms like a cough, congestion, runny nose, diarrhea, or vomiting should not leave home
 - Vulnerable or high-risk populations require special considerations. Individuals or parents of children should work with their primary care provider and the program director to determine if the activity is a reasonably safe option for them
 - Anyone from out of state (except those allowed by state guidelines) or a Mainer who has travels out of state must self-isolate for 10 to 14 days before participating in the onsite faith formation program or activity
 - Do not provide transportation for anyone outside of an immediate household, i.e. no carpooling

Appendix C: Guidelines for Gathering with Minors in Virtual Environments

(adapted from the Archdiocese of Omaha in support of the Circle of Grace curriculum)

The goal of these guidelines and all diocesan safe environment practices are to protect both minors and the adults who work with them from opportunities for abuse or false accusations, respectively.

- Parent/guardian written consent is required prior to connecting with minor(s). Consent also must be obtained for conducting and or recording of all on-line meetings and or classes.
 - All on-line meetings with minors must be by invitation only. Public access is not allowed.
 - Invitations to participate must be sent to parents of minors. Parent can opt to have you *also* send the invitations directly to a minor's e-mail address or phone number.
 - Minors should be notified if the meeting will be recorded, and recordings will be retained for possible review for at least one year.
- All leaders are required to have completed the necessary background checks, Protecting God's Children training, and continue to complete monthly Virtus bulletins. Exceptions may be granted by program coordinator for guest speakers who are not Safe Environment certified.
- No on-line meetings are permitted with less than 2 adult leaders present and actively engaged at all times. Breakout groups of 3 or more people are allowed, though one adult must be present in each group.
- On-line meetings including minors must take place using accounts identified with and administrated by the parish or school. Personal accounts may not be used, and session recordings may not be stored on personal equipment or virtual accounts.
- The leaders must monitor and control who is participating in the on-line meeting. The leader should maintain the ability to immediately remove any participant who is acting inappropriately.
- The leader must maintain control over what appears on the screen.
- While parents/guardians may participate with their children, they must be logged on from the same account as their children.
- All parties should be aware of their audience and surroundings while participating in virtual meetings. Participants and hosts should be in appropriate spaces of their homes and avoid personal spaces (e.g. lying in bed) or inappropriate dress (e.g. pajamas).
- Remind catechists and leaders of their [responsibilities as mandated reporters of suspected abuse or neglect](#) of minors.
- The meeting host should record all meetings for future review and retain the recording for reference purposes only for at least one year. ***Parish may choose to forego recording virtual sessions with minors under one of the following scenarios:***
 1. **Catechists host virtual sessions on site at the parish** where the parish catechetical leader is also present to supervise as he or she would if learners were gathering on the physical premises.
 2. **OR All 4 of the following practices are in place:**
 - a. parents/guardians have given their written permission for the children to participate in the virtual session/program, AND
 - b. any private chat or sharing feature on the platform is disabled, AND
 - c. at least two adults with cleared background checks and Protecting God's Children training are active in the virtual session, AND
 - d. the program supervisor and parents/guardians have the links to drop-in to observe the virtual session.

NOTE: family sessions designed for parents/guardians participating along with their children do not need to be recorded.

Best Practices for Online Education and Ministry

- When scheduling a meeting, under “Advanced Options”, choose to utilize a Waiting Room and disable “Join before host”. This will allow you to screen who can enter the group. This is required if you are sharing any Meetings ID’s publicly to ensure that anyone who should not be in your meeting is unable to get in.
- Ensure participants are unable to chat privately; you can disable the chat feature entirely or allow participants to chat with everyone in a central chat area. This will ensure that private chats are not occurring, especially between adults and minors.
- Disable screen sharing for anyone other than the host.
- Enable an adult core member to be a “co-host” to help moderate the event and conduct the meeting in the event you as the “host” get disconnected.
- It is permissible to utilize “breakout” rooms with one vetted and PCG trained adult leader in each small group discussion. The host can join in on the various discussions.
- Use Grid-View and do not hide self-view while on calls with minors to ensure the recording shows everyone.
- The time of scheduled events should mimic regularly scheduled activities, preferably occurring between 8:00am to 9:00pm at the host location.
- Dress and grooming habits of hosts and participants should be in accordance with current guidelines in place at the host institution.
- Participants, including children and parents/guardians, should be reminded frequently if an on-line faith formation session is being recorded and that you are doing so for the safety and protection of the children and adults in keeping with our safe environment practices outlined in the diocesan Code of Ethics. All recordings should, to the extent possible, follow Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act FERPA guidelines and be retained for at least one year. Session recordings may not be posted or shared publicly.
- The host and participants should use their given name (first and last) when signing into the on-line meeting.
- Screenshots of any meeting, especially with minors, should not be shared to personal social media accounts. If the picture is to be shared through institutional social media and/or e-mail, names should be blurred.
- It is highly recommended that the host of any on-line meeting create standards for effectively managing conversation and share these at the beginning of all sessions.

Sample Language for Permission Form for Virtual Settings

IMAGE RELEASE & PERMISSION TO PARTICIPATE IN VIRTUAL LEARNING AND FORMATION SETTINGS

There are times when we would like to share good things happening in the parish/school and diocese. To do this, we need parental permission to publish or display publicly photographs, videos, or other media that includes images of minors. This includes print and digital formats used by the parish/school or diocese such as bulletins, newsletters, websites, Facebook or Instagram. While the grade level or group of children depicted may be provided, additional parental permission will be secured before using full names to identify specific children in an image or recording.

There are other times when we would like to offer learning and faith formation activities in virtual settings such as videoconferences and interactive social media platforms. Parent and learners will receive specific invitations for any virtual gatherings and all sessions will be recorded for later review. To help protect both minors and the adults who work with them from opportunities for abuse or false accusations, the parish may record virtual sessions with minors. Such recordings will be stored securely and confidentially for up to one year for reference purposes if needed to investigate a reported violation of our safe environment practices outlined in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland Code of Ethics.

Please list the names of all your children who may be involved in parish or diocesan activities. Indicate your permission by circling “Yes” or “No” for each child.

Name of Child (list below)	<i>I give my permission to display or publish my child's image as described above and for my child to participate in virtual learning and formation settings provided as part of parish programming</i>
	YES NO
	YES NO
	YES NO

Signature of parent or legal guardian _____ Date _____

Appendix D: Sample Resources to Share with Parishioners

Assessing Risk before Deciding to Go Out

The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers a website to help people discern the current risk of engaging in different activities www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/going-out.html

Self-Check Poster for Families ([Click](#) to download poster or share the link)

#CareForSelf&Others #StopTheSpread

SELF-CHECK BEFORE LEAVING HOME



Within the last 10 days have I had contact with anyone who has been diagnosed with or who may have symptoms associated with COVID-19?

Yes No



Am I unable or unwilling to wear a face covering while I am in public, inside buildings or less than 6 feet away from people who do not live in my home?

Yes No



Have I traveled outside of the state of Maine in the last 2 weeks to a state other than Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, or Vermont? You are exempt from this restriction if you are **fully vaccinated** against, are **recently recovered** from, or have a **recent negative test for Covid19**.

Yes No



Do I have **ANY** of the following unusual symptoms:

Yes No

- Fever of 100.4 or higher
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Cough
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Loss of taste or smell
- Unexplained body aches?

If you answered "Yes" to ANY question, remain home for your health and that of others.

If you answered "No" to all four questions, you may go out in public with minimal risk to others. Be sure to wear a face covering and stay safe!



Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland - March 9, 2021

Please check the Maine CDC for up-to-date info on Covid19 related safety and health protocols.