



CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF INDIA (CBCI)

C.B.C.I. Centre, 1 Ashok Place, Near Gole Dakkhana, New Delhi-110 001. India

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Cardinal Oswald Gracias

President

June 7, 2020

Your Eminence, Your Beatitude, Your Grace, Your Lordship,

Happy Feast of the Holy Trinity! God love you! We ardently beseech our Blessed Mother to pray for our Dioceses/Eparchies, our motherland India, and the world.

The number of Covid-19 cases is increasing, and India now ranks fifth according to the number of cases! Yesterday was the highest one-day spike. Hence we cannot let our guard down. Caritas India has as of today assisted 1.1 crore people. CHAI is fully involved. All our dioceses are engaged in relief efforts. Congratulations on this marvellous witness. Keep it up!

The Central Government has permitted Churches to be opened from June 8: tomorrow. However several States have extended the lockdown and in these States our Churches are not being opened. I would urge all my brother Bishops, notwithstanding pressure from different groups, not to be in a hurry to start Eucharistic Sacrifices in our Churches, till you have a satisfactory Protocol in place.

I wish to come to the main purpose of this letter. May I share with you some guidelines which might be useful in preparing our Protocol or Standard Operating Procedure (SOP). Since we are still in lockdown, I have not yet issued any norms for the Archdiocese of Bombay.

The factors that need to be taken into account are: the right of our faithful to have pastoral care; our responsibility to protect people from the danger of infection that could prove to be fatal; Government directives, and liturgical law. With the above in mind, I suggest:

1. There should be social (physical) distancing in the Church: one square meter distancing is prescribed (unless it is a family from one household). Hence the number of people allowed to enter the Church should be restricted. The Bishop should specify how many can enter each Church. This would depend on the size of the Church/Chapel/Hall. Although in some countries it is half the capacity, I would recommend less: one third of the capacity of your Church. You would require sufficient ushers to control the entry of the faithful into the Church. It is recommended if possible, that there be just one entry point and another exit point. Clear signages should indicate this.

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2. There should be sanitising of hands. Church doors should be kept open so as to avoid physical contact with the handles, doors, etc. People could be requested to come with their hands sanitised at home. However I would recommend some provision for washing of hands with soap, water and tissue at the entrance of the Church. Also a dustbin where they may dispose used tissues. These should be burnt after the liturgical service.
3. The holy water stoups should be dry. No sprinkling with holy water.
4. All entering into the Church should wear masks. Ushers should ensure that no one enters without a mask.
5. In the Church people should sit at a distance, one in a pew, or if the pew is long, one could sit at either end. Households could sit together but distanced from others. Social distancing is not just sideways but also in front and back
6. No Choir is permitted; hence Cantors could be used if there is singing.
7. When exiting after Mass, ushers should guide the people to leave pew by pew so that there is no crowding at the door.
8. We come to the most vexing issue: the distribution of Holy Communion. Many factors have to be considered: the safety of our people; no danger of transmission of virus from priest to people or from communicant to communicant; safety of our priests; Government directives which explicitly prohibit any "physical offering like Prasad" inside the religious place.

There have been several suggestions regarding this:

1. Restrict the number of people drastically.
2. Place a Ciborium with Consecrated Hosts on a table; people can come and communicate directly.
3. Distribution of Holy Communion after Mass

Suggestion 2 would give rise to the possibility of an infected person endangering the lives of others. The solution which may be most appropriate in the present circumstances is a modification of suggestion 3 above. The Eucharist is celebrated with just the priest (and servers) receiving Holy Communion. After the conclusion of the Mass, people are invited to leave the Church in an orderly manner.

Communion could then be distributed in a neighbouring hall, in the Eucharistic Chapel or in a small designated area outside the Church. You need to restrict the number of communicants: zones could take turns. In a restricted way (zone-wise,

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village-wise), the faithful may be given Holy Communion with social distancing in the queue and the priest wearing a mask while distributing Holy Communion only on the hand. If he accidentally touches someone's hand, he immediately stops and sanitises his hand before resuming the distribution of Holy Communion.

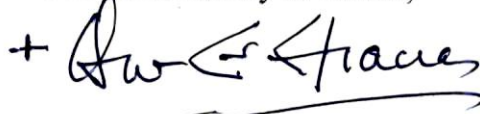
I would urge that the number of Masses be increased, perhaps doubled. Priests have the faculties to binate and trinate. I would also recommend that you grant a dispensation from the Sunday obligation for all of a specified age/morbidity. (e.g. those above 65 years and those below 10 years and also those with cough/cold/fever). In the Protocol set by several diocese in the United States there is limit on the duration of Mass (30 minutes for weekdays and 60 minutes for Sundays). Also a gap between the Masses to prevent crowding at Church doors. Knowing your own particular situation, you could decide whether this is required.

I hope the above has been useful to you. Each Bishop should discuss with his Curia how to gradually open our Churches. Some dioceses are planning to just keep the Churches open initially and may have the Eucharistic Celebrations later.

In case someone insists on receiving Holy Communion on the tongue: this is very dangerous both for the minister and the communicant, please discourage them from this. If they insist and you agree, I would recommend that you tell this individual to come to the sacristy where very carefully the Holy Communion may be given. I have given the above general guidelines, aware of the very diverse situations in our country. Please adapt them to the local circumstances as necessary.

With affectionate regards and best wishes, I remain

Yours fraternally in Christ,



✠ Oswald Cardinal Gracias

Archbishop of Bombay

President, Catholic Bishops Conference of India