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Diocese of Erie updates COVID protocols

As previously announced, the Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, has lifted the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass effective this weekend, August 14-15. Mindful of the surge in COVID-19 cases as a result of the Delta variant, the bishop also has issued a new decree modifying protocols that were last updated in July.

The overarching principle upon which the protocols are based is that Bishop Persico intends to maintain public worship throughout the diocese while at the same time ensuring parishioners are kept as safe as possible.

“We continue to strongly encourage anyone who is not vaccinated to wear a mask while in church,” a memo accompanying the updates from the Chancery said. **“In addition, we are now encouraging everyone, excluding the celebrant, in counties where there is a substantial or high rate of COVID-19 transmission, to wear a mask while in church regardless of their vaccination status.”** The update also calls for everyone distributing Holy Communion to wear a mask while doing so. Earlier requirements that those distributing must be vaccinated and must sanitize their hands prior to distribution, remain in place.

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Last week, the Bishops of Pennsylvania, including Bishop Persico, issued a statement emphasizing that caring for the health, safety and spiritual wellbeing of parishioners and their communities is one of their priorities. In the statement, they also noted that they are listening to input from parishioners, including those with medical expertise, as cases of the Delta and other new variants are surging.

Recognizing it is evident the COVID-19 pandemic may linger for months or years to come, they said that each diocesan bishop will communicate with their dioceses, asking them to “prioritize their own health and the health of their neighbors and faith communities.”

The bishops also reiterated that by longstanding church law, the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday does not apply to those who are sick, have a serious health risk, live in a household with those at risk, are primary caregivers to those at risk, are unable to attend Mass in person or **have serious anxiety or concerns about being in a large-group setting due to COVID-19**. They said anyone who believes they might have COVID-19 or one of its variants should stay home “as an act of charity.”

The latest revisions to protocols in the Diocese of Erie can be found at www.eriescd.org/bishop/particularlaw.html while the full statement from the Pennsylvania bishops is available at www.eriescd.org/news/News-releases.html.

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