

April 17, 2020

I am writing to update you on new directives issued on Wednesday, April 15 by the PA Secretary of Health, Doctor Rachel Levine. These directives will affect parishes as “*Businesses Permitted to Maintain In-Person Operations*” as referenced in the title of the new directives. The directives will take effect on Sunday, April 19 at 8:00 p.m. I have attached a pdf file of the actual government order, for your information. Please read it.

In Wednesday’s press conference, the Governor noted that many businesses in Pennsylvania have already begun implementing most or all of the new required procedures, and the new directives are to insure continuity across all essential businesses in the Commonwealth who are permitted to conduct in-person operations.

In most if not all parishes, in-person operations have been drastically reduced, and many parishes have already implemented most of the requirements in the new directives. At least a few, however, are new, and every parish will need to implement them.

REGARDING SECTION A:

In the attached document, Section A deals mostly with employers and employees. This section would refer, therefore, to you and your parish staff. In particular, I draw your attention to Section A, par. 4, 10 and 14, which state respectively:

(4) stagger work start and stop times for employees when practicable to prevent gatherings of large groups entering or leaving the premises at the same time;

(10) Provide masks for employees to wear during their time at the business, and make it a mandatory requirement to wear masks while on the work site, except to the extent an employee is using break time to eat or drink, in accordance with the guidance from the Department of Health and the CDC. Employers may approve masks obtained or made by employees in accordance with Department of Health guidance;

(14) Ensure that all employees are made aware of these required procedures by communicating them, either orally or in writing, in their native or preferred language, as well as in English or by a methodology that allows them to understand.

What this means is that those working in the parish office and other staff are now required by the Commonwealth to be wearing a mask when working, except on break when eating or drinking. As the employer, the pastor may authorize staff members to wear a mask that they provide for themselves, as long as it meets the PA Department of Health Guidelines (cf. <https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/coronavirus/Pages/Stop-the-Spread.aspx>) .

In accord with par. 14, you will need to inform your staff of these requirements.

REGARDING SECTION B:

Section A deals mostly with the general public. This section would refer, therefore, to your parishioners who come to the parish office or who stop in the church to pray. In particular, I draw your attention to Section B, par. 1 and 6, which state in part:

- (1) Where feasible, businesses should conduct business with the public by appointment only and to the extent that this is not feasible, businesses must ... place signage throughout each site to mandate social distancing for both customers and employees;
- (6) require all customers to wear masks while on premises, and deny entry to individuals not wearing masks ... however, individuals who cannot wear a mask due to a medical condition (including children under the age of 2 years per CDC guidance) may enter the premises and are not required to provide documentation of such medical condition;

What this means is that the Bishop strongly advises that at all open entrances to the office or church, parishes should have clear signs which instruct visitors that by order of the Commonwealth, parishioners are required to maintain social distancing during their visit and are required to be wearing a mask unless unable to do so due to a medical condition; those not meeting these requirements should not enter but instead should call the parish office for assistance.

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These are difficult days, and we are called to take exceptional measures, not only to protect ourselves but also to protect our colleagues and those whom we serve. Furthermore, you may not be aware that the Dioceses of Pittsburgh, Greensburg, and Altoona-Johnstown have all ordered churches to be locked until further notice. Bishop Persico, however, wants to continue to give the faithful access to our churches to the extent that we are able to do so. We need to cooperate with the civil officials in following these directives not only because the law obliges us to do so, but also because they are our best option for allowing the faithful continued access to the churches.

If you have any questions about these directives, please do not hesitate to ask. In the meantime, please know of my prayers for your continued health, and my gratitude for all that you are doing.

Msgr. Edward M. Lohse  
Vicar General