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Bishop Persico establishes committee to explore the full return to public worship

Even as administrators and pastors in the Diocese of Erie follow the recommendation of the Centers for Disease Control to maintain significant protocols, the Most Rev. Bishop Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, is looking to the future. In recent weeks, he has asked Deacon Steve Washek, executive director of the Office of Faith Formation, to oversee a committee of staff and pastors tasked with considering how parishes can best welcome parishioners back to Sunday Mass.

No date has been set to lift the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass put in place more than a year ago. That is likely to be months away. But the committee is looking well beyond the logistics of that day.

Although parishes have been sustained by the sacramental life they maintained, parish communities are longing for the day that they can safely worship together. Committee members plan to lay a solid foundation that will focus on helping parishes extend a warm and pastoral welcome; help people find hope and

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healing after endless months of separation, loss and longing; celebrate and renew life as a parish community; and explore the opportunities for growth and transformation that will come from this unexpected moment.

Certainly, many have been attending Mass since the return to public worship after a two-and-a-half-month hiatus the bishops of Pennsylvania put in place in mid-March of 2020. A significant number of Catholics, however, have opted to remain away from crowds, choosing instead to participate in Mass via livestream. As people move through the weeks-long process of being vaccinated, and as the summer months make it possible to keep windows and doors open, it's likely the numbers of those attending Mass in person will gradually grow.

The committee has been reviewing the plans other dioceses have in place and determining the best ways to reach both pastors and individuals with inviting and informative messages. They are looking for cohesive, engaging messages, but seek simplicity rather than a highly produced campaign.

"One of our first priorities is to make sure we understand what people across the diocese have been experiencing," Deacon Steve says. "The parish is our spiritual home, where we share the joys, sorrows, feasts, and ordinary time with our Sunday worship family. We are longing to be whole again."

Committee members, all of whom are connected to parishes, know the diocese and individual parishes have been very engaged throughout the pandemic, making resources and socially distanced events and opportunities available. At the same time, a certain sense of disenfranchisement was unavoidable.

"We encourage everyone to approach this time of transition with charity and patience," Deacon Steve says. "No one has experience with a moment like this. So, our first request is that people ask the Holy Spirit to accompany the committee and the diocese."

Another early step for the committee is recognizing that a return to Sunday Mass in person will require a two-pronged effort.

“We are looking at both short and long-term goals,” Deacon Steve says. “There will come a time when the dispensation is lifted, and that will require education. But going forward, we see a wonderful opportunity to help parishes and parishioners deepen their understanding, their commitment, their appreciation and their faith.

In a diocese of 96 parishes spread across 10,000-square-miles, the approach will not be one-size-fits-all.

“We will develop resources for parishes including bulletin reflections, links to helpful websites, videos, encouragement from Bishop Persico and more,” Deacon Steve says. “But our goal is to create materials in such a way that parishes can select whatever will meet their needs from a menu of options.”

Those serving on the committee include:

Deacon Steve Washek, executive director, Faith Formation Office, *Chair*

Father Scott Detisch, pastor, St. John the Evangelist Parish, Girard

Mary Hickin, director, Faith Formation for Catechesis and Sacraments

Jessie Hubert, director, Faith Formation for Parish Support

Father Matt Kujawinski, pastor, Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Mercer and
administrator, Office of Worship

Father Tom Whitman, pastor, St. Joseph Parish, Sharon

Anne-Marie Welsh, director, Communications Office

Kate Wilson, director, Faith Formation for Marriage and Family Life

Jillian Zaczyk, director, Faith Formation for Young Adult and Youth Ministry

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