



Diocese of Rockford

555 Colman Center Drive
P.O. Box 7044
Rockford, Illinois 61125

(815) 399-4300
Fax (815) 399-4769

Office of the Bishop

February 23, 2022

Dear Monsignors/Fathers,

The Diocese of Rockford continues to evaluate the COVID-19 restrictions issued by the Illinois Governor and the State agencies as well as the reported incidence of COVID-19 cases which has decreased in many communities statewide. In light of this information and the Illinois Appellate Court's ruling against the State agencies last week, I have made the following changes, all of which are effective today:

Moving to Mask-Optional at all Masses and Sacramental Events

Our parishes may implement a mask-optional policy at Masses and sacramental events, such as Weddings, Baptisms, Funerals, Confirmation, and First Holy Communion. Whether to wear a mask during Mass or portions of the Mass is to be an individual decision of the priests celebrating Mass, those attending Mass, and all participants in the Mass, including musicians, choir members, cantors, lectors, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, greeters, servers, and ushers. Continue to refrain from distributing the Precious Blood at Masses. The Sign of Peace may resume provided there is no physical contact. Individual collection baskets may now be passed through the pews.

Moving to Mask-Optional in our Parishes and Diocesan Facilities

Our parishes may implement a mask-optional policy in its church buildings, offices, workplaces, parish halls, and meeting spaces, as well as in all its ministries and parish activities including RCIA classes, Religious Education classes, and at meetings and gatherings. Whether to wear a mask is to be an individual decision of the priests, religious, parish and Diocesan employees, volunteers, parishioners, and visitors. To make clear, the mask-optional policy applies to employees, retreatants, volunteers, clients, families, and visitors of Bishop Lane Retreat Center, the adult building of St. Elizabeth Catholic Community Center, Catholic Charities offices, and all other Diocesan facilities. The Catholic Charities Ombudsman Program employees and volunteers should continue to follow the requirements set forth by the non-Diocesan entities they visit, such as long-term care facilities. St. Elizabeth Center should continue to follow DCFS rules applicable to daycare centers.

Food and Beverages at Parishes and Schools

All restrictions on serving or providing food and beverages are lifted. Please continue to use your judgment when considering buffet-style meals and disposable plates and utensils.

Our Schools and School Activities

On Sunday February 6, 2022, our school administrators received notice from the Diocesan Catholic Office of Education to:

- discontinue the rule requiring “vaccinate or test weekly” of school employees;
- implement a mask-optional policy for all school employees, students, volunteers, and visitors; and
- not exclude from school premises students and school employees who exhibit COVID-like symptoms or who are a “close contact” with a COVID-19-positive individual, unless a written directive to do so is received from the student’s or school employee’s healthcare provider, or the student or school employee is given due process prior to the exclusion (see Section 2 of the Illinois Department of Public Health Act).

These directives remain in place for our school employees, students, school families, and volunteers in our schools, extra-curricular school activities, and in school sports activities. Additionally, test-to-stay practices may be discontinued at our schools.

COVID-like Symptoms and “close contacts” in our Parishes and Diocesan Facilities

Employees of parishes, Diocesan locations, and at Catholic Charities offices, Bishop Lane Retreat Center, and St. Elizabeth Center adult building who exhibit COVID-like symptoms or who are a “close contact” with a COVID-19-positive individual are not to be excluded from the workplace/premises unless 1) the healthcare provider of the employee has directed in writing that his or her patient isolate or quarantine away from work or 2) the employer provides the employee with due process (see Section 2 of the IDPH Act) prior to the exclusion of that individual. This applies to schools as well; see section above.

Any location that wishes to create COVID-19 restrictions should be in contact with the Chancery or the Catholic Education Office beforehand.

Isolation/Quarantine and Reporting of COVID-19-Positive Instances Remains Unchanged

Anyone who tests positive for COVID-19 is required to isolate or quarantine in accordance with the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (“CDC”) and his or her healthcare provider. Employees and parents of students are reminded to report their positive COVID-19 instances to the parish or school so that close contacts can be notified to monitor their symptoms. When an employee or student is confirmed COVID-19-positive, continued best practice is to notify workplace employees and school families but do not disclose the individual’s name.

No Requirement of a Negative COVID-19 Test Result When Returning to School or Work

Consistent with the recent court ruling, employees of a parish, school, or Diocesan location who have isolated or quarantined because they have tested positive for COVID-19 are not required to produce a negative COVID-19 test result in order to return to work. Similarly, employees who are home sick with an illness other than COVID-19 are not required to produce a negative COVID-19 test result in order to return to work. The Employee Handbook allows the employer to require a note from the employee’s healthcare provider stating the employee may return to work when the employee returns from an illness of

more than 3 consecutive days. Employers are not to require that the note state the employee is no longer COVID-19-positive. CDC guidelines currently provide that an individual who tests positive for COVID-19 may discontinue isolating/quarantining after 5 days, provided the individual has no fever and the individual's symptoms have improved. A negative COVID-19 test result is not a CDC condition of coming out of isolation/quarantine.

Students who have isolated or quarantined because they have tested positive for COVID-19 are not required to produce a negative COVID-19 test result in order to return to in-classroom instruction or school activities, religious education programs, or parish activities. Similarly, students who are home sick with an illness other than COVID-19 are not required to produce a negative COVID-19 test result in order to return to in-classroom instruction or school activities, Religious Education programs, or parish activities. To the extent school policies require a doctor's note verifying the student is able to return to school, that may be enforced.

Although we are moving away from many COVID-19 restrictions as the incidence of infections wanes in our communities, we continue to evaluate infection levels and may have to resume some of the earlier restrictions in the future. I ask you to notify your employees of the above changes. This letter will be sent today to Superintendents and Principals, Department Heads, and Regional DREs. Specific directives for Lent and Holy Week were sent to all priests recently.

I thank you for your continued cooperation.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ *David J. Malloy*

Most Reverend David J. Malloy
Bishop of Rockford