

**COVID-19 Guidelines for Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Programs
of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester
3/23/2021**

In addition to the guidelines already issued by the diocese (Guidelines for Beginning the Public Celebration of Masses and for the reopening of schools), the following guidelines are specifically offered for our faith formation and youth ministry programs.

A. Introduction

“At the center of every process of catechesis is the living encounter with Christ. ‘Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.’” (Directory for Catechesis, 54)

As baptized Christians, we have an obligation to proclaim the Gospel. Pope St. Paul VI reminds us that

“Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ’s sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection” (Evangelization in the Modern World, 14).

People are hungry for the Good News that Christ lived and died for our salvation. St. Paul admonishes us to “preach the word, be urgent in season and out season” (2 Timothy 4:2) and we must use all the gifts, creativity, wisdom and prudence we have to continue to answer that call now, more than ever. Jesus Himself had to contend with the obstacles of His day in preaching the Gospel and so must we. These guidelines are intended to facilitate our fulfillment of that mission to which we have been called.

COVID-19 has reshaped many plans and priorities and we have had to adapt in serving the formation of our Catholic people. Current trends indicate that these new and unique challenges are not going away anytime soon and the 2020-2021 faith formation year will be altogether different for everyone. Parish faith formation programs should plan for Option A, provided they can follow the guidance in this document. If unable to follow all the guidance at this time, please select Options B or C depending on local circumstances. Parishes utilizing Option A should also have preparations in place to quickly pivot to Options B or C as needed.

- A. Onsite/in-person faith formation activities and events including family formation at those parishes that utilize such an approach (following guidance below including participant limits in Section D)
- B. Virtual/Online/Remote faith formation activities and events
- C. Hybrid approach, combining both virtual and in person elements of faith formation

B. General Principles

- “Faith formation” is used in this document as an all-inclusive term referring to adult formation, youth ministry, family formation, and programs of systematic catechesis and sacramental preparation for children.

- Parishes must have adequate personnel and supplies to implement these guidelines, and ensure that everyone is sufficiently trained and ready. Should the need arise that faith formation be suspended, preference should be given to the Sacramental years (Penance/Eucharist and Confirmation).
- Parishes offering faith formation either on-site or off-site should have a Preparedness Plan.
- Communicate the Preparedness Plan for faith formation to all parishioners including parents. It is important that everyone understand what the parish is doing to keep people safe at faith formation activities and events.
- Parishes should utilize the [Student Waiver](#) and the [Volunteer Waiver](#) for all participants of Faith Formation programming.
- Policies and practices for 2020-2021 faith formation year should be flexible in responding to new information and developments. A willingness to adapt and refine approaches when specific practices are not working will be needed.
- Special considerations should be made to best provide for the needs of individual children and families. This is especially true of more vulnerable populations.
- As the primary educators and catechists of their children, accommodations should be made and parish support given if parents and caregivers decide to homeschool their children's faith formation program this year rather than participate in any onsite activities.
- All activities involving children and youth must follow [Safe Environment child-protection protocols](#). In order to ensure our children's safety during this time, please follow [the addendum offered from the Diocesan Safe Environment Program](#).
- All COVID-19 positive persons, those who are symptomatic, and those living with them, may not participate in programs until after they have self-quarantined as [per CDC guidelines](#).
- [At-risk persons](#) and those with preexisting health conditions should consider staying home and not attending in-person faith formation activities at this time.
- If an adult, child or youth experiences symptoms of COVID-19 or tests positive following attendance at a faith formation activity, the pastor and head of faith formation should be notified immediately.
- If the parish has a Catholic school that shares facilities with faith formation and in-person school classes are suspended due to an outbreak of COVID-19, in-person faith formation activities and events should be suspended until the Pastor determines it is safe to resume.
- If faith formation children and youth attend school in a local public school district(s) that closes an individual school or schools due to an outbreak of COVID-19, the Pastor, following guidance from the County Health Department, will determine whether in-person faith formation activities and events will be temporarily suspended.
- If the faith formation program is in a local public school district(s) that chooses not to hold in-person classes at one or more schools to begin the school year, the Pastor, in consultation with his

faith formation staff, will determine whether in-person faith formation activities and events will occur following the guidance in Sections C, D, and E of this document.

C. Staff, Volunteers and Training

- The Director of Faith Formation (or equivalent) is a focal point for raising concerns or questions that any program participant (catechist, learner, parent, volunteer) might have regarding procedures and/or incidents. It should be clearly communicated that any information, feedback, suggestions etc. from parents, learners and your catechetical volunteers is welcome.
- Ensure that volunteer catechists are properly trained on the Preparedness Plan and understand their critical role in ensuring a healthy environment for faith formation.

D. Events and Activities

- Faith formation events and activities generally fall into three categories:
 - Static – A structured situation such as a talk or presentation on some aspect of the faith. Attendees arrive, sit and listen or pray, and then depart. This would also include faith formation classes for children and youth, provided all participants, except the catechist, face the same direction.
 - Static+ – Gathering in a larger group and then breaking into small groups. Other examples would be bible studies or small groups where participants are facing and talking towards each other and all events held outdoors.
 - Dynamic – An unstructured situation such as a social gathering that involves high levels of movement throughout one or more indoor spaces.
- Static events and activities are considered low risk, Static+ as middle risk and Dynamic as higher risk.
- At this time, it is recommended that faith formation events and activities remain primarily Static or Static+ in nature.
- If a planned activity must be dynamic in nature, participants must be limited to 50% capacity, with no more than 250 people. Activities that cross over from Static or Static+ to Dynamic should follow the Dynamic participant limits and maintain social distancing requirements and prohibit uncontrolled mingling or gathering before or after the service, as this type of contact creates an increased risk of transmission.
- Attendance should be taken at all faith formation activities and maintained on file. Parents should monitor the symptoms of their child(ren) and not send those who exhibit symptoms.
- There is no evidence that COVID-19 is spread by food. However, people sharing utensils and congregating around food service areas can pose a risk.
 - If a cafeteria or group dining room is used, serve individually plated meals or grab-and-go options, and hold activities in separate areas.

- Avoid offering any self-serve food or drink options, such as buffets, salad bars, and drink stations. Consider having pre-packaged boxes or bags for each attendee.
- For social gatherings (for example, a movie night), capacity may not exceed 50%, up to a maximum of 250 people. For venues with a capacity over 500, maximum attendance can be determined by the [Minnesota Department of Health entertainment venue guidelines](#) or [MDH capacity calculator](#).
- If home meetings take place for Youth Ministry, they should meet outdoors, when possible. Face coverings and social distancing are strongly recommended but not required for indoor private gatherings per the [Minnesota Department of Health: Face Covering Requirements and Recommendations](#). All spaces must be sanitized before and after use and food service should follow the rules outlined above.
- Group travel for off-site activities, including service projects, should be limited and only occur if the mode of transportation can accommodate appropriate social distancing. Participants should wear face coverings while traveling.
 - Off-site activities, including service projects and retreats, must follow the same procedures as on-site activities depending on the category (number of participants, social distancing, face coverings, personal hygiene, etc.)
 - See further information on group travel at [Guidance for Bus Transit Operators](#) and [Considerations for Schools](#) from the CDC.
- Parishes that utilize Catechesis of the Good Shepherd should follow the [Considerations for Opening CGS Atria in Light of COVID-19 Concerns](#) from CGUSA.

E. Social Distancing

- Per [Minnesota Executive Order 20-81](#), face coverings are required at this time for all participants over the age of 5 (adults, children, youth, faith formation staff, and volunteers) during indoor activities. The [Minnesota Department of Health](#) provides further information on this requirement and legitimate exemptions. Face coverings may be worn for outdoor activities at the discretion of individual participants.
- Off-site events and activities that are indoors must also follow Minnesota Executive Order 20-81 with the noted exemptions from MDH.
- Face coverings should not be worn by children under age 2, per Minnesota Executive Order 20-81 and CDC guidelines.
- A minimum of 6 feet of social distancing should be maintained during both indoor and outdoor activities. This may necessitate the rearranging of faith formation spaces in the parish.
- Physical contact between individuals should be avoided (i.e. handshakes, hugs).
- Parishes should have a plan in place for arrival and dismissal of children and youth from formation activities in order to maintain social distancing guidelines.

F. Disinfecting and Cleaning Measures

- Frequently touched surfaces (door handles, microphones, etc.) should be regularly cleaned and sanitized per the [Minnesota Department of Health](#) and [Center for Disease Control](#) (CDC) recommendations, according to a set schedule in the parish's preparedness plan.
- If faith formation events and activities will use space in a Catholic school, the head of faith formation must coordinate with the school principal to develop a plan to ensure those spaces are appropriately cleaned and disinfected prior to the subsequent school day.
- Personal belongings (phones, writing utensils, etc.) should not be shared. Plans should be developed to limit the sharing of common supplies.
- Faith formation programs should have a plan in place to ensure bathroom procedures for children.
- Personal hygiene – All participants should:
 - Disinfect their hands upon entering the church/school building with provided hand sanitizer.
 - Avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.

G. Conclusion

With all these guidelines, it is clear that the Faith formation year of 2020-21 will not be the way we are used to. We take solace in the Holy Father's own response in a recent interview:

"A tension between disorder and harmony: this is the church that must come out of the crisis. We have to learn to live in a church that exists in the tension between harmony and disorder provoked by the Holy Spirit. If you ask me which book of theology can best help you understand this, it would be the Acts of the Apostles. There you will see how the Holy Spirit deinstitutionalizes what is no longer of use, and institutionalizes the future of the church. That is the church that needs to come out of the crisis.... We can either get depressed and alienated—through media that can take us out of our reality—or we can get creative. At home we need an apostolic creativity, a creativity shorn of so many useless things, but with a yearning to express our faith in community, as the people of God."

(<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/time-great-uncertainty>)

"The encounter with Christ involves the person in his totality: heart, mind, senses. It does not concern only the mind, but also the body and above all, the heart." (Directory for Catechesis, 55) Let us not fail to keep in mind the many unique opportunities that will present themselves this year. This pandemic has brought various amounts of suffering to some and if we are attuned to it, we can effectively bring Christ to them by praying with them and offering them a listening ear (and perhaps a shoulder to cry on).

The diocesan Offices of Faith Formation, Youth Ministry and Safe Environment stand ready to assist you in any way possible. Please continue to pray for all those affected by this pandemic:

Pope Francis' Prayer to the Virgin Mary for Protection from the Coronavirus

O Mary, you shine continuously on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope. We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick. At the foot of the Cross you participated in Jesus' pain, with steadfast faith. You, Salvation of the Roman People, know what we need. We are certain that you will provide, so that, as you did at Cana of Galilee, joy and feasting might return after this moment of trial. Help us, Mother of Divine

Love, to conform ourselves to the Father's will and to do what Jesus tells us: He who took our sufferings upon Himself, and bore our sorrows to bring us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen.

We seek refuge under your protection, O Holy Mother of God. Do not despise our pleas – we who are put to the test – and deliver us from every danger, O glorious and Blessed Virgin. Amen.