

Guidelines on Sacraments and Pastoral Care

*Working Group on Infectious Disease Protocols for Sacraments & Pastoral Care*¹

June 14, 2020

Guidelines on the Conferral of Holy Orders

Introduction

The conferral of the sacrament of Holy Orders in the ordination of priests is an extremely important moment in the life of the Church. “Priests by sacred ordination and mission which they receive from the bishops are promoted to the service of Christ the Teacher, Priest and King. They share in his ministry, a ministry whereby the Church here on earth is unceasingly built up into the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit.”² It is also a highly significant occasion for the men who are ordained, their families, and their friends, as well as for the local church, the bishop, and the priests of the diocese.

While it would be preferable to hold priestly ordinations without any limits on attendance, without physical distancing requirements, and so forth, it may nonetheless be essential to the life of a local church for ordinations to occur during this time. In what follows, we aim to provide guidelines for how ordinations may be held in a manner consistent with current public health and medical requirements.

Guidelines

These guidelines presuppose that Holy Orders will be conferred during a Mass that generally follows the previously published guidelines for the phased resumption of public Masses.

A bishop, priest, deacon, or ordinand with a respiratory infection of any kind should avoid participating in an Ordination Mass during this phase. The same holds for other ministers who

¹ Dr. Timothy P. Flanigan, M.D. (Prof. of Medicine (infectious diseases), Alpert Medical School of Brown University); Dr. Thomas W. McGovern, M.D. (Catholic Medical Association National Board Member, Former Clinical Research Physician, U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases); Dr. Paul Cieslak, M.D. (*Infectious Diseases & Public Health, Catholic Medical Association member*); Fr. Dominic Legge, O.P. (Assist. Prof. of Theology, Director of the Thomistic Institute, Dominican House of Studies); Fr. Dominic Langevin, O.P. (Assistant Professor, Editor of *The Thomist*, Dominican House of Studies); Fr. Paul Scalia (Vicar for Clergy, Diocese of Arlington); Fr. Gregory Pine, O.P. (Thomistic Institute). We are grateful for the comments and review of Dr. Thomas Cesario, M.D. (*Prof. of Medicine (infectious diseases), Univ. of Calif. Irvine School of Medicine*); Dr. Suzanne Strom, M.D. (*Associate Clinical Professor, University of California, Irvine*); Fr. Christopher Pollard (*Diocese of Arlington*); Rev. Msgr. Robert J. Vitillo (*Attaché, Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the UN in Geneva and Secretary General, International Catholic Migration Commission*); and Fr. John Baptist Ku, O.P. (*Assoc. Prof., Dominican House of Studies*).

² Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 1.

might serve at a Mass, as well as for sacristans, ushers, etc. If any have an elevated temperature or are experiencing any respiratory symptoms, they should not take part in the ceremony.

Physical Distancing: Those present should generally try to avoid being within 6 feet of others, but where necessary, a momentary interaction presents an acceptable risk, especially if other precautions are taken. Given that the virus is thought to spread principally via respiratory droplets from sneezes and coughs, the transmission risk is lower from brief encounters than from prolonged contact.

Physical distancing should be maintained as much as possible during an Ordination while the risk of community spread of COVID-19 infection remains. The number of men to be ordained and the space available in the sanctuary of the church will influence the arrangements of the ceremony. However, the Ordination rite itself requires only a few moments of close physical proximity between the bishop, the ordinands, and concelebrating priests. If all parties are feeling well, do not have an elevated temperature, and do not manifest any respiratory or other symptoms, these brief moments of physical proximity do not present an unreasonable risk. With proper hand hygiene before and after (and even during) the Mass, the ceremony can be carried out without significant change in usual practices, except as indicated below.

The Master of Ceremonies and servers will need to be particularly attentive to their positions in the sanctuary and be sure to keep distance from others when not performing some essential task.

Limits on attendance: Ordinations are especially joyful occasions. It is painful to imagine limiting access to them. Unfortunately, the risk of community spread does call for restrictions on the size of gatherings, and so ordinations taking place during this time may require difficult decisions about who can attend. Depending on what is permitted by local authorities, organizers may need to limit the number of family members and other guests, as well as the number of concelebrating priests.

Organizers should also consider what precautions and limits are appropriate regarding gatherings after a Mass of Ordination.

A general reminder should be given to all involved in the ceremony – the bishop, the ordinandi, concelebrating priests, and ministers – to **wash their hands carefully before and after Mass**, and to avoid touching their faces during the ceremony. In addition, we propose careful hand hygiene at specific moments during the rite, so as to mitigate the risk of transmission by touch.

In addition to what is said in the Guidelines for Celebrating Mass, the following observations about elements particular to the rites of Ordination might be helpful in planning these ceremonies. (These observations focus on the Ordination of priests; the Ordination of deacons is less complicated, and several of the principles described here can be applied to the Ordination of deacons.)

An ordination involves several moments where the ordinand and the bishop are in close proximity (e.g., at the promise of obedience, at the laying-on of hands, at the anointing of hands). These are extremely important for the rite and are imbued with sacred significance. In view of this, we propose careful hand hygiene (e.g., the use of hand sanitizer or the traditional post-anointing hand washing) at specific moments during the rite, so as to mitigate the risk of transmission by touch.

In addition, we recommend that the bishop and the ordinands each self-screen for an elevated temperature, other symptoms, and exposure to COVID+ individuals on the morning of the ordination. (A sample checklist can be found in the appendix below.) Ensuring that they have answered “no” to all the screening questions will mitigate the risk that they might transmit the virus to each other during the ceremony, and would make it less necessary to insert additional safeguards into the Ordination rite itself.

Use of Masks or Face Coverings: Given the great significance of the sacramental encounters between the bishop and the ordinands, and in line with the parallel provisions of this Working Group’s guidelines for public Masses, we do not recommend that the bishop or the ordinands wear masks or face coverings during the rite of Ordination, even though they will be in close proximity for a few brief moments during the ceremony. (Brief encounters pose a lower risk than extended encounters.)

- **At the promise of obedience:** The bishop and the ordinandi should sanitize their hands immediately before proceeding to this part of the ceremony. Assuming they have just done so, the placing of the elect’s hands between those of the bishop should not present a risk to either person. The question and response transpire in less than a minute and constitute a reasonable exception to physical distancing. Masks are not required for this exchange, or for the other interactions listed below.
- **The Laying on of Hands by the bishop** is an essential part of the administration of the Sacrament. It should not present a problem, because the physical proximity is brief and the risk of the spread of virus through touching the top of a head is minimal.

- The Laying on of Hands by other priests who are present should likewise be considered to carry no unreasonable risk, for the same reasons. While not an essential part of the administration of the Sacrament, the ritual book makes no provision for its omission.
- **The vesting of the newly-ordained priests by a concelebrant** could be organized to minimize physical proximity. For example, rather than each ordinand having his own assisting priest, a single assisting priest might go from person to person to make sure the vestments are in order.
- **The Anointing of Hands** is a brief rite. [Evidence suggests](#) that the olive oil used in the sacraments is not a friendly environment for the virus. Conveniently, the ritual expressly calls for the washing of hands of both the bishop and the newly-ordained priests after this anointing. Washing hands with soap and water is reliably effective against the virus. They should take care not to touch their faces after washing their hands.
 - *Recommendation:* place the sacred chrism to be used at the ceremony in a separate vessel from the main oil stock (i.e., do not use a vessel containing a large quantity of chrism or one that will need to be returned to the ambry). After the ceremony, reverently dispose of the leftover chrism in the vessel, and then wash the vessel well with soap and water.
- The offertory procession could be limited to a minimum number of participants, spaced out further than would usually be the case. The use of a pall or the lid of a ciborium can help ensure that the bread and wine being offered are protected from possible exposure to contaminants. The interaction of those bearing the gifts with the bishop will be extremely brief. The bishop should avoid shaking hands or other direct physical contact.
- **The Handing Over of the Chalice and Paten** is another brief encounter. Both the bishop and the ordinands will have just washed their hands in the wake of the anointing of hands, and so additional hand hygiene is not needed here.
- **For the exchange of peace**, the traditional form is recommended: with both standing, the Bishop grasps the shoulders of the newly-ordained, while the ordinand touches the elbows of the Bishop. As both make a slight bow of the head to the right, the usual exchange is said. The same procedure can be used for the sign of peace offered by the other priests who are present, but note that the ritual only requires “at least some of them” to do so.
- Parts of the Eucharistic Prayer to be said by the newly ordained could be prepared on loose sheets of paper, to make it easier for them to keep distance from the bishop and from each other as they stand at the altar.

- To the extent possible, consecrate the Precious Blood in a large number of separate chalices. This will permit each new priest to consume the Precious Blood from a separate chalice. If other concelebrants receive the Precious Blood in the normal way, having a larger than usual number of chalices on the altar would also mean that fewer priests will receive from each chalice. In addition, several chalices might be designated for concelebrating priests who may opt to receive via intinction.

Appendix
COVID-19 Self-Screening Checklist
(Circle one for each line)

Before filling out this checklist, take your temperature with a thermometer

Do you currently have any of the following symptoms?

Fever (99F+)?	Yes	No

Chills?	Yes	No

Muscle aches?	Yes	No

Cough?	Yes	No

Shortness of breath?	Yes	No

Unexpected Fatigue?	Yes	No

Sore throat?	Yes	No

Loss of taste or smell?	Yes	No

Headache?	Yes	No

Diarrhea, vomiting, or nausea?	Yes	No

Other cold symptoms?	Yes	No

Have you been in close contact (within 6 feet for 15 minutes or more) with someone confirmed or suspected of being COVID+ in the last 14 days?

Yes No