

**On Worship as Essential, and Clergy as Essential Workers**  
*Thomistic Institute Working Group*  
*on Infectious Disease Guidelines for Sacraments & Pastoral Care*<sup>1</sup>

**Executive summary: It is important that clergy be considered essential workers with regards to vaccine distribution because they play a critical role in providing spiritual support in our communities in this time of crisis.**

Access to divine worship and to sacraments is of high importance for the spiritual good and overall well-being of the faithful. As Catholics, we maintain that Christian worship and sacraments are just as necessary for the human person -- indeed, far more necessary -- than many commercial activities. This is particularly true in a time of high anxiety and potentially grave sickness.

The human person is more than a living body, and so the care of human persons must also provide for their spiritual well-being. Especially for the elderly, the sick, and the dying, this is of the utmost importance. In some cases, access to the sacraments may be necessary for salvation.

Further, there is now widespread recognition that the pandemic's strain on our mental health is enormous. Anxiety and depression are at high levels. Treatment for mental illness is often hard to access. Suicide rates are high among all ages.

Hard scientific data show the benefits of regular worship (usually defined as weekly in most studies) which supports social and mental health and bolsters resiliency. "Going to church" should be seen as an essential community activity.

Recent court decisions have mandated that religious worship be treated equally with other similar activity. This is an important step towards recognizing that worship is essential.

**But something more is needed: the recognition of clergy as essential workers, and thus their speedy access to vaccines, just like other frontline workers in essential activities.**

---

<sup>1</sup> 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*).

If worship is essential -- and if churches are at least as essential as schools, retail establishments, and liquor stores -- then, just like those who work in the service of those other activities, clergy should also be regarded as essential workers, and should be included in vaccine distribution plans in the same way.

Most active Catholic priests are frontline workers. Compared with the general population, priests deal disproportionately with sick individuals, with the elderly, and with their families. They have to be there for them in times of crisis, ready to anoint them, to hear their confessions, and to bring them Holy Communion. Bringing the spiritual aid of the sacraments to the dying is a priest's sacred duty. Every active priest needs to be ready to perform such service for the faithful, and so it is just as important to provide them access to the vaccine as teachers, grocery workers, and others who serve the public on the frontline.