

Introduction

Health issues and public hygiene are in the news. In fact, hardly a week, or even a day, goes by without our hearing news reports of a new strain of virus, be it a seasonal flu, an influenza or a pandemic influenza.

Public health officials at the provincial and federal levels are quite preoccupied by the possibility or threat of a rapidly spreading strain of flu or influenza. They have taken a proactive approach and encourage both the private and public sectors as well as different organizations to establish guidelines.

Our archdiocese has responded to this request by setting up a diocesan ad hoc committee whose members participated in formation sessions offered in Moncton and in Fredericton and consulted several sources – organizations, companies, dioceses and other institutions – to prepare these guidelines.

The objective of these guidelines is :

1. to ensure that the health of the members of our Christian community is protected,
2. to maintain the liturgical and pastoral life of our Church, and
3. to reassure our community on our capacity to react rapidly in the event of a crisis.

A few definitions

An *influenza* or a *flu* is a viral respiratory illness usually contracted during the winter months. It is present in a region for a few months and strikes mainly young children as well as the elderly, both being the two most vulnerable age groups to chronic illness.

The term *epidemic* is used when there is an increase or an unusually rapid spread of a flu or an influenza in a given community or territory within a limited time.

An *influenza pandemic* is the spread of an epidemic on a global scale. In this case, the epidemic is present in almost all the countries of each continent. While a seasonal flu is usually present during the fall or winter, a pandemic can strike at any time of the year.

Each outbreak of the flu or an influenza comes from a different strain of the virus. This explains why a vaccine may not be readily available.

An *influenza pandemic* occurs approximately three times each century. During the last one, three pandemics occurred at approximately thirty years apart. The World Health Organisation expects a pandemic at any given moment since the last thirty year cycle began in 1968.

In the event of flu, an epidemic or an influenza epidemic, public health officials would step in to offer guidelines for the public. They could propose special measures and might even go so far as imposing a partial or complete ban on all public gatherings.

Liturgical and pastoral life of the Church

Churches are gathering places for the baptized who need to assemble to form their Christian identity and to be Church.

In the event of a flu epidemic or an influenza in our midst, we must be able to effectively communicate with our communities to advise them which measures will be taken so that our gatherings do not become areas prone to the spread of the virus.

These guidelines are proposed in order to protect the physical and spiritual health of all the members of our communities as well as our clergy. Of course, we hope to never have to use them. This is why we have adopted the old adage: "It is better to be safe than sorry."

We must insist on the benefits of preparing an action plan. This type of plan helped to minimize casualties during an outbreak of Legionnaires Disease in Barrow Alaska, in 2002.

At the very heart of our faith are the gatherings, the sacraments and liturgy. These become even more important during a time of crisis when Christians turn to the Church for comfort, hope and help in understanding the meaning of catastrophic events.

Unfortunately, these gatherings can become areas where the flu or an influenza virus can spread. Contact between people or between people and contaminated objects are serious factors in the spread of a virus and must be taken into consideration.

In light of these, we must emphasize the responsibility of the ecclesiastical authority as stipulated in article 223.2 of the Code of Canon Law : « In the interest of the common good, ecclesiastical authority has competence to regulate the exercise of the rights which belong to the Christian faithful. ».

The diocesan liturgical and pastoral instructions proposed in these guidelines take into account the instruction of the Code of Canon Law which states that individuals, while exercising their rights, must « *take account of the common good of the Church and of the rights of others as well as their own duties toward others.* » c. 223.1

How can we protect our parishes?

Before we address issues of flus or influenzas, let us review a few elementary principles of hygiene.

It is difficult to avoid contracting a virus because it is easily transmitted in common areas and public places. However, we can avoid or limit its spread between people or between people and objects.

In order to do this, we recommend that each pastoral unit evaluate its existing hygiene measures in areas used for worship and in meeting rooms. This exercise will help identify problem areas and to correct the situation when necessary.

However, each parishioner will have to determine his or her own tolerance level, knowing that their decision will be respected. Will I drink from the cup? Will I give a sign of peace with physical contact or otherwise?

To help answer these and other questions, certain steps are proposed in the diagram included as an attachment to this document.

When it comes to matters of public health, we cannot plead ignorance. It is our duty to be proactive.

Levels of intervention

We propose three levels of intervention:

1. Preventative measures – We invite each pastoral ministry team and their moderator to appoint either their local liturgy council or local pastoral council to (1) undertake an inventory of their present situation in order to determine which measures need to be taken immediately, those which will need to be addressed in the event of an outbreak of flu or influenza and those to be taken in the event of a pandemic influenza and (2) determine who will be responsible for follow up measures.
2. A flu or an influenza epidemic. Churches remain open to welcome those parishioners who are healthy or those who have recovered after being sick. These parishioners will be able to fulfill their obligation to participate at Sunday mass, have access to support and a spiritual healing process through these troubling times.

The faithful will inevitably be exposed to a risk of infection from people who are contaminated and are not yet presenting any symptoms.

It will be important to advise the sick or those who believe they may be infected, to abstain from participating in Church related community and religious activities.

Parishes can minimize the risk of contamination by avoiding all physical contact. See attached diagram on this point.

3. A flu or an influenza pandemic. In this case, public health officials would ban all public gatherings or would advise against them.

If public health officials ban all public gatherings, the diocese will have to respect this decision and close all churches. The decision to reopen will also come from these same officials. See attached diagram on this point.

As to bans on large public gatherings, the diocese will publish directives after having consulted public health officials. These decisions will be addressed by the bishop and his advisors.

How to maintain sacramental life in the Church?

Both crisis situations compel us to find solutions that will allow us to maintain the sacramental life in the Church for our ailing parishioners or to respond to church closures.

Obligation to attend Mass (canon 1247). We could advise the faithful that mass is available on television, on the radio or on our website at: www.diomoncton.ca. We could also distribute *Liturgy of the Word* booklets to help the community to pray at home.

Confessionals. Even though churches may still be open, we will close all confessionals to avoid the spread of a virus to confessors or from penitent to penitent. Designated areas will have to allow adequate space between confessor and penitent.

Funerals. During an acute pandemic, public health officials may impose collective burials. Ceremonies would take place in the cemetery and could be prepared according to the Funeral Rites.

Baptisms. During a period of high mortality rates, we can predict an increased demand for baptisms. We must expect that the laity will have to take charge since priests will not be immune to this flu epidemic or pandemic. We must offer the necessary formation to the laity so that they can administer this sacrament in accordance with canon 861.2.

Anointing of the sick. One of the priorities during a pandemic will be the priests' ability to minister to the sick, the dying and the dying who wish to receive the last rites. When a person is in agony, there are three dimensions to sacramental care for the person and for his or her family: (1) the Eucharist as viaticum, (2) the visit to the dying, and (3) the anointing of the sick. The first two dimensions can be administered by a priest, a deacon or by a mandated minister, but the third is reserved to priests only. The priest has a serious obligation (canon 1003.2) to be present for the sick and the dying. The laity, for their part, will be asked to participate on a voluntary basis since they will be risking infection or risk infecting their families.

References

Various sources were used in preparing these guidelines.

Some information was gathered during a presentation by third year nursing students from Université de Moncton and Dr. Georges-L-Dumont Hospital staff in January 2007 and an information session titled Managing Risk Pandemic Planning and Crisis Response in May 2007, in Fredericton.

We also drew inspiration from documents prepared by Business New Brunswick, the dioceses of Davenport, in Iowa, and Lancaster, in the United Kingdom, the presentation titled *Planning for a pandemic* from Marsh & McLennan Companies of Halifax, documents from Montreal's health and community agency, the World Health Organisation's Global Plan in preparation for a flu pandemic, Health Canada in Ottawa, Villa du Repos nursing home in Moncton, and the Plan to fight against the influenza pandemic from the Province of New Brunswick's health sector.

Committee Members :

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Web sites :

www.Nouveau-Brunswick.ca

www.phac-aspc.gc.ca

www.influenza.gc.ca

www.cdc.gov/flu

www.gnb.ca/0053/pandemic

www.who.int

www.catholicsinhealthcare.com

www.davenportdiocese.net

Hygiene measures to prevent the spread of infectious diseases during gatherings

Possible spread of a virus	Preventative measures...		
	Always	During acute flu seasons	During a pandemic
<p>FOR ALL CELEBRATIONS (Mass, weddings, funerals) where there is a possibility of physical contact or shared material.</p>		Even though churches are still open, people may be contagious and not know it.	<p>Public health officials ban all public gatherings. At this time, churches will be closed and liturgical celebrations temporarily suspended. The community will be invited to follow a televised or radio broadcast mass or to visit the diocesan web site for daily readings, prayers and meditations. The bishop will communicate with the christian community all decisions relevant to life in the Church.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presider 	Disinfect hands with antibacterial gel or towelette before communion.	Disinfect hands with antibacterial gel or towelette before communion.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printed materials such as <i>Living with Christ</i>, hymnals, etc.) 		Stop distribution of <i>Living with Christ</i> booklets	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministers of communion 	Use an antibacterial gel or desinfectant towelettes for effective hand washing before communion.	Use an antibacterial gel or desinfectant towelettes for effective hand washing before and after communion.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communion with the Host 	Avoid touching the mouth, tongue or teeth	Avoid touching the mouth, tongue or teeth. Advise against taking communion on the tongue (explain why)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communion with the Cup 	Thoroughly wipe the rim using a clean section of the purificatory (cloth?)	Suspend communion with the cup to avoid possible contamination between parishioners.	

Possible spread of a virus	Preventative measures...		
	Always	During acute flu seasons	During a pandemic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign of Peace • Pyx 		<p>Instead of physical contact, opt for another sign such as a smile, a word or a nod</p> <p>The pyx should not be placed on the altar</p>	
OTHER INSTRUCTIONS			
Baptism and Confirmation		Refer to "For all celebrations". Minimize physical contacts (ex. : holy oil, holy water) and shared materials (towels, etc.)	
Reconciliation		Choose a space other than the confessional	
Respiratory hygiene Risks associated to contact with people presenting flu-like symptoms (coughing, sneezing)		Explain the rules of respiratory hygiene. Advise people to avoid community and religious gatherings if they are presenting flu-like symptoms or if they have been in contact with someone who is ill.	
Clean surfaces inside the church as well as all meeting rooms		Clean flat surfaces as well as door knobs after each mass or meeting.	
Fonts		Do not use fonts.	