



Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance for religious services

27/02/2020

v1.2

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This guidance document gives general advice about preventing the spread of COVID-19 during religious services. While the guidance describes several practices specific to Christian religious services, people from other religious groups can adapt the advice to their specific requirements.

Background

In late December 2019 Chinese authorities identified a cluster of novel coronavirus infections in Wuhan City, China. The name of the virus is SARS-CoV-2 and the name of the disease it causes is COVID-19.

The outbreak has evolved rapidly and further global spread is likely. Because of the risk of the disease spreading to Ireland, we must take all possible action to prevent the potential spread of the disease in the community.

COVID-19 can be a mild or severe illness.

The symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty breathing
- Fever (high temperature)

COVID-19 can also result in more severe illness including:

- Pneumonia
- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
- Kidney Failure

Further information on COVID-19 is available on the HSE website at:

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>

The SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 is spread mainly through droplets produced by coughing or sneezing. You could get the virus if you:

- come into contact with someone who has the virus and is coughing or sneezing
- touch surfaces or objects that someone who has the virus has coughed or sneezed on, and then touch your mouth, nose or eyes.



General recommendations for all

People who are ill should not attend religious services.

If members of the congregation, religious leaders (e.g. priests) or others involved in religious services (e.g. ministers of the Eucharist) feel ill and may have COVID-19 (see below), even if their symptoms are mild, they should stay at home and follow this advice:

If you **feel unwell with symptoms of COVID-19** (e.g. cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, high temperature)

AND

If in the 14 days before you became unwell, you have:

- travelled to Ireland from an [area with presumed ongoing community transmission of COVID-19](#), or
- been in contact with a person who has COVID-19, or
- attended/worked in a healthcare facility where patients with COVID-19 were being treated

then you should:

- **Isolate yourself** (i.e. stay separate from other people)
- **Phone your GP without delay. If you do not have a GP phone the Emergency Services on 999 or 112 and ask for the National Ambulance Service.** Tell your GP/Emergency Services about your travel history and symptoms.
- It is important that you **PHONE your GP first and talk to them rather than arriving at the GP surgery without contacting them** so that you don't put staff or other patients at risk of infection.
- Your GP/Emergency Services will advise you of the next steps over the phone.

If members of the congregation, religious leaders (e.g. priests) or others involved in religious services (e.g. ministers of the Eucharist) **feel well** and have no symptoms, but in the past 14 days they have:

- travelled to Ireland from an [area with presumed ongoing community transmission of COVID-19](#), or
- been in contact with a person who has COVID-19, or
- attended/worked in a healthcare facility where patients with COVID-19 are being treated

they should phone the **HSELive helpline** on **1850 24 1850** for advice.



High risk groups

Those considered to be at higher risk for COVID-19 include the following:

- People aged 65 years and older
- People with long-term medical conditions – for example, heart disease, lung disease, diabetes or liver disease

Reducing the spread of infection-leaders and congregation

You should always practice good hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene. Hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene are a series of actions to take which are designed to reduce the spread of disease, including COVID-19, to yourself and others. These actions include regular handwashing and covering your mouth and nose with a tissue or the bend of your elbow when you cough or sneeze.

Hand hygiene:

Wash your hands regularly. You should wash your hands:

- after coughing or sneezing
- before, during and after you prepare food
- before eating
- after using the toilet
- before and after caring for sick individuals
- when hands are dirty
- after handling animals or animal waste

Wash your hands with soap and running water when hands are visibly dirty. If your hands are not visibly dirty, wash them with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub.

See HSE hand hygiene guidance at <https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/how-to-wash-your-hands.html>

Respiratory hygiene:

Cover your mouth and nose with a clean tissue when you cough and sneeze and then promptly dispose of the tissue in a bin and wash your hands. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into the bend of your elbow instead, not into your hands.

[Posters](#) on preventing spread of infection are available on the HPSC website.



Settings where religious services take place, including churches, should take the following actions

- Advise religious leaders/clergy and congregation not to attend if they are ill.
- Have a plan for dealing with religious leaders or members of the congregation who become ill with symptoms of COVID-19 during a service, including isolating them from other people and seeking medical advice without delay (e.g. phone a GP/ Emergency Services).
- Supply tissues and alcohol based hand gel at religious services/gatherings.
- Provide bins for disposal of tissues at religious gatherings.
- Ensure hand-washing facilities, including soap and disposable towels, are well maintained.
- Ensure all hard surfaces that are frequently touched, such as door handles, hand rails, taps and pews are cleaned regularly with a household detergent.
- Have a plan for how the church will continue or suspend its activities in the event of religious leaders/clergy becoming ill with COVID-19.

Religious leader/clergy administrations to sick laity should be carefully managed

To date, there have been no cases of COVID-19 in Ireland. If there is a case, it is highly likely that the patient will be treated in a hospital and their pastoral care can be provided in the hospital according to established protocols and with full compliance with infection prevention and control guidance and in close consultation with their treating doctor.

People at increased risk of getting COVID-19, including people who have been in close contact with a person with COVID-19, may be asked to limit their social interactions for 14 days, including staying at home and not attending work or religious services. In order to reduce the possible spread of infection, these people should not be visited by religious leaders/members of the clergy while they are in self isolation. Pastoral care can be provided over the telephone/skype if resources permit.

Physical interaction during religious services, e.g. Sign of Peace

Most physical interaction during religious services, e.g. shaking hands while exchanging the 'Sign of Peace' in Christian religious services, involves a low risk of spreading the virus especially if members of the congregation who are unwell do not attend religious services while they are ill.

However, because COVID-19 is a new disease that has not been seen in people before, we need to exercise extreme caution to limit the spread of the virus. Current information suggests that COVID-19 can spread easily between people and could be spread from an infected person even before they develop any symptoms. For these reasons we suggest that physical interaction during religious services, including the Sign of Peace, should be suspended. For Christian religious services, the priest may choose to give the congregation permission to carry out an alternative Sign of Peace that does not involve hand contact (such as smile/ nod/ bow) if so wished.

The practice of shaking hands on greeting and departure at religious services/ gatherings should be suspended for both religious leaders/clergy and laity.



Holy water fonts

Because COVID-19 is a new disease and appears to spread easily between people, we advise that holy water fonts should not be used.

Holy Communion

Everyone administering Holy Communion should wash their hands or use alcohol based hand gel before beginning.

Holy Communion should be administered into the hands only and NOT onto the tongue

Using communal vessels for food and drink during religious services, e.g. drinking from the Chalice during Holy Communion in Christian services

To minimise the risk of spread of infection, the use of communal vessels should be suspended. For example, during Holy Communion in Christian religious services only the celebrant should drink from the Chalice. No one else should drink from the Chalice – this includes other priests, ministers of the Eucharist and members of the congregation.

Alternatives to direct sharing of the Chalice should also be AVOIDED including:

1. Intinction, i.e.:
 - the Communion wafer is dipped in the Chalice and administered into the hand
 - the Communion wafer is administered into the communicant's hand and they dip it into the Chalice
2. Distribution of Communion wine through individual small cups

Arrangements for parochial activities/social religious gatherings

Parochial activities/social religious gatherings on church premises should follow sensible practices, including hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene as described in this guidance. Posters/notices formally stating any guidance or changes in practice should be clearly displayed and appropriate leaflets should be circulated.

Further sources of information

Further information on COVID-19 is available on the HSE website at:

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>

and the HPSC website at:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/>