

Diocese of Shreveport

Office of the Bishop

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January 26, 2022

To the faithful in the Diocese of Shreveport:

Because there is a lot of conversation out there related to restrictions resulting from the spread of Covid, and because not a few question the whole issue of such restrictions, I believe it is timely to write you with a few thoughts for your reflection.

As 2021 was coming to an end, the reported spike in occurrences of Covid prompted me to visit with experts in the medical field about reinstating some of the previous restrictions which had been lifted, specifically the wearing of masks at Mass, and the gatherings of large groups of people in our parishes and schools. With regards to our schools, I asked that school Masses be suspended until this spike had passed. Like those medical experts I had visited with, I had hoped and anticipated that we would be back on track, without restrictions within a month. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Some dioceses in Louisiana have been more affected than others.

I can give you a couple of examples of such, though for as many people who are aware of them, there are those who think these restrictions are an over-reaction to our situation. St. John Berchmans Elementary School had over 50 students out during the week of January 10 with either Covid, or exposure to someone who had been exposed. A number of the teachers at St. John's were also absent for the same reasons, or who chose virtual learning out of fear of the virus. Today (January 26), 25 students were absent.

St. Joseph's School entire 5th grade (two classes of students) were sent home the week of January 10th. I am told that five teachers were among those who could not or should not be in the classroom. These two examples are not insignificant, and to ignore them would be irresponsible. We were advised that large gatherings should be avoided.

I did not want to have us go back to when we cancelled Sunday Masses at our churches, but rather to resume the wearing of masks in church. I simply wanted us to do our part to respond when there is a spike in our schools, and when our children gather in large numbers. Daily Masses for children, especially in those places where the numbers are high should be put on hold until we see an improvement in the number of positive cases. As of today, those numbers are improving, and those who advise me suggest that in approximately two weeks these restrictions can be lifted – but we won't know that until each day's numbers show the improvement.

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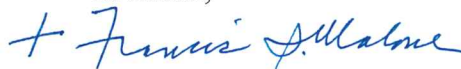
Like you, I do not like restrictions. It gives me no pleasure to impose restrictions, especially as they impact the spiritual life of our children. But it would be irresponsible of me to simply ignore the reality in the number of new cases. I guess if you've never been sick you don't think about it, but I am amazed at the number of people I have encountered in the past few months who have taken no safeguards to their health, or to the health of those around them. I hate face masks, and sometimes I forget to wear one – but I'm usually alone at the altar so the risk is low. That's not an excuse, but it's also why I have directed our pastors not to refuse admission to our churches for those who do not wear masks or have simply forgotten them.

I carry a certain responsibility for those entrusted to my care, this applies to everyone, but especially to our children and our elderly. Any restriction has them in mind – and their spiritual as well as their physical well-being while in our care is utmost in my mind and heart.

Everyone I have encountered has an opinion about masks, social distancing, restricted large meetings, the vaccine, and even the virus. I cannot debate those issues, and I leave it to the medical professionals to help me be the most responsible bishop I can be. Believe me, I know where most of our brothers and sisters stand – and it's all over the spectrum of opinions. But the one thing we should keep in mind is the fact that anything we do, such as I have done, is only intended to keep children and parishioners safer. I certainly apologize for not writing to you sooner, but we all lack a certain amount of patience as to when the virus will leave us, and when restrictions will no longer be necessary.

I ask for your daily prayers that this happens very soon, and we can get back to normal. Know of my daily prayers for you.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Francis I. Malone". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross symbol at the beginning.

+ Francis I. Malone, D.D., J.C.L.
Bishop of Shreveport