

Influenza and the Liturgy

In the May, 2003 BCL Newsletter, the Committee on the Liturgy addressed the spread of SARS disease and the Liturgy. In recent weeks, an early onset of the annual influenza epidemic has provided the opportunity for reflection on similar issues in regard to certain liturgical practices. After an extended consultation on this important pastoral issue, the Secretariat for the Liturgy offers the following questions of clarification.

1. What is influenza?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "influenza (commonly called "the flu") is a contagious respiratory illness caused by influenza viruses. Infection with influenza viruses can result in severe illness and life-threatening complications. An estimated 10% to 20% of U.S. residents get the flu each year: an average of 114,000 people are hospitalized for flu-related complications and 36,000 Americans die each year from complications of flu."

2. Why is there particular concern for the spread of influenza this year?

Various concerns with the availability and efficacy of influenza vaccines, early onset of the disease and preliminary indications that the spread of the disease might be more significant this year contribute to increased caution. In its latest report, ending December 6, 2003, the CDC reports that "twenty-four state health departments reported widespread influenza activity, fifteen states and New York City reported regional activity, six states reported local influenza activity, and five states and Guam reported sporadic influenza activity."

3. What is the best way to prevent the transmission of the influenza virus? According to the Centers for Disease Control, "As with other infectious illnesses, one of the most important and appropriate preventive practices is careful and frequent hand hygiene. Cleaning your hands often using either soap and water or waterless alcohol-based hand sanitizers removes potentially infectious materials from your skin and helps prevent disease transmission."

4. How is the influenza virus transmitted?

According to the CDC, "influenza viruses are spread when a person who has the flu coughs, sneezes, or speaks and spreads virus into the air, and other people inhale the virus. When these viruses enter the nose, throat, or lungs of a person, they begin to multiply, causing symptoms of the flu. The viruses can also be spread when a person touches a surface with flu viruses on it (for example, a door handle) and then touches his or her nose or mouth. A person who is sick with the flu can spread viruses - that means they are contagious. Adults may be contagious from 1 day before developing symptoms to up to 7 days after getting sick. Children can be contagious for longer than 7 days."

5. How can the spread of the influenza virus be prevented?

While the single best way to prevent the flu is to get vaccinated each fall, the CDC recommends these other ways to prevent the flu: "Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect

them from getting sick too; Stay home when you are sick. If possible, stay home from work, school, and errands when you are sick. You will help prevent others from catching your illness; Cover your mouth and nose. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. It may prevent those around you from getting sick; Clean your hands. Washing your hands often will help protect you from germs; Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs are often spread when a person touches something that is contaminated with germs and then touches his or her eyes, nose, or mouth.

6. What has the Church done in localities where the outbreak of influenza is most significant?

In those localities where the outbreak of the disease has been the most significant, Bishops have introduced several liturgical adaptations in regard to such practices as the distribution of Holy Communion and the exchange of the Sign of Peace in order to limit the spread of contagion.

7. What measures should be taken in Roman Catholic liturgies in the United States of America?

Priests; deacons, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should be especially reminded of the need to practice good hygiene. Ministers of Holy Communion should be encouraged to wash their hands before Mass begins, or even to use an alcohol based anti-bacterial solution before distributing Holy Communion.

8. What about further adaptations or the restriction of options at Mass? The Diocesan Bishop should always be consulted regarding any changes or restriction of options in the celebration of Roman Catholic Liturgy. While in some heavily affected locales, Bishops have introduced extraordinary measures after seeking the advice of local medical experts, the need for the introduction of widespread liturgical adaptations for the prevention of the transmission of influenza in the dioceses of the United States of America has not been indicated by the CDC at this time.

9. What is the Secretariat for the Liturgy doing to address this question? The Secretariat will continue to closely monitor the situation and provide the best advice possible to Diocesan Bishops and their Offices for Worship. The Secretariat likewise appreciates whatever information Diocesan Offices for Worship are able to provide concerning local conditions and the pastoral responses developed by Diocesan Bishops. Continuously updated information is available from the Centers for Disease Control at <http://www.cdc.gov/flu/>.