



The Episcopal Diocese of Lexington
Diocese of Lexington
The Rt. Rev. Stacy F. Sauls, Bishop

Pastoral Letter to the Clergy of the Diocese of Lexington on the Subject of Swine Flu

April 30, 2009

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We are faced with two important realities. One is that the swine flu risk is serious and real. The other is that fear and panic are not likely to be helpful. Both, in a very real sense, are agents of disease. Both are important for you, as the pastors of your people, to address.

I encourage you, therefore, not to be agents of disease. I find myself almost equally concerned about not overreacting and about people staying away from Communion out of fear. What I am searching for is a balance. In that spirit, I offer the following as suggestions and not by any means as mandates.

First, you might consider taking precautions so as not to be agents of spreading viruses. For example, you might think about the following ideas.

- Keep a small bottle of an alcohol-based sanitizer (*e.g.*, Purell) discreetly on the credence table. I suggest that every minister, lay or ordained, involved in the distribution of the elements use it immediately prior to the distribution. This small step can be done in a manner that does not call undue attention to itself. Anyone involved in the distribution should not hesitate, as needed, to return to the credence to cleanse hands discreetly.
- Consider changing your practices for the distribution of communion.
 - Holy Communion is to continue to be offered in two elements to all the people (this part *is* a mandate and not merely a suggestion). However, I suggest discouraging the practice of drinking directly from the chalice at this time.
 - The best alternative practice to drinking directly from the chalice would be for a chalice administrator to follow the priest (or other person) distributing the host. The priest should dip the host in the wine and place both elements co-mingled in this manner on the communicant's tongue.

(In truth, it is actually not appropriate, either as a matter of eucharistic devotion or of public health, for the communicant to dip the bread in the wine.)

- Take this opportunity to teach your people that receiving the bread alone is a perfectly valid communion, which is certainly preferable to not receiving communion at all out of fear. At the same time, I would suggest informing them that, if you take the steps above, omitting the wine is not necessary.
- I encourage you to explain to your people what changes you are making and why and that the steps you are taking are intended to be responsible steps in light of the current circumstances and in the interests of individual and community health.
- Under no circumstances whatsoever should anyone be turned away from the Holy Eucharist, whatever our suspicions might be about health. (This is one is a bit more than a suggestion, too.)
- On my remaining visitations this year, I will follow the procedures I am suggesting and teach accordingly. My intention is to set a good example.

It is not in your peoples' spiritual interest to stay away from the Holy Eucharist because of health concerns. At the same time, I strongly believe you must be careful not to seem fearful or overly concerned. The message to convey is that you are taking appropriate precautions in light of the situation.

If you follow appropriate precautions you as the clergy should feel safe in consuming any elements remaining at the end of the Eucharist. If you do not feel safe in doing so, that might tell you something. I think you should explain this to your people and that it would be an important gesture in the equally important interest of public confidence in the sacraments for your people to see you perform the ablutions at the altar. (Normally, I do not think the ablutions are a particularly salutary part of the ceremonial. In this case, however, I think they may be pastorally helpful, even if not ritually necessary, in the interests of relieving unnecessary anxiety.)

Regarding church events, and working with children in particular, I urge you not to cancel Sunday school or any other event because of the flue possibility. Doing so, I believe, would be an overreaction and increase your peoples' anxiety unnecessarily. However, there are again some reasonable precautions one might take.

- Please instruct all persons working with children to take appropriate precautions, including the washing of hands and the use of Purell or similar products before and after every Sunday school class. Every child might also be given a drop of Purell to use as they enter and leave class.

- Please instruct all persons working with children to pay special attention to symptoms that could be flu-related. They should discreetly inform the parents of children exhibiting such symptoms of what they have observed at the very earliest opportunity. I think this should be treated as a confidential communication with the parents involved, at least at this time.

I do not think we need to make a bigger deal of this problem than it is. On the other hand, disease is not an instrument of God and we must not be complicitous in disease or its spread.

Aside from taking these precautions at this point, I do not suggest that you do anything. We can all follow the news and adjust our practices as may be necessary. As always, your confidence at this time of danger, even though it is slight, is the pastoral guidance your people need.

With my ongoing love, and the assurance of my prayers for all of you, I am

Faithfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stacy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Stacy F. Sauls
Bishop of Lexington