

Diocese prepares for flu pandemic: ten things you need to know

Summary:

- Government and business are putting plans in place to protect against Bird Flu.
- The diocese has begun preparations to protect the health of clergy and laity.
- The overall aim is – plan to deliver and hope we never need to use it.
- We could be facing 1,365 deaths among Catholics in the Diocese of Lancaster alone.
- To avoid infection spread it is recommended that the sign of peace, reception from the chalice, and communion on the tongue be temporarily suspended during a pandemic.
- The diocese is considering the distribution of a Liturgy of the Word booklet to enable the faithful to worship at home.
- The danger in visiting the sick is that ministers – without hygiene discipline – could spread the disease throughout the community.
- Priests, deacons, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion will not receive anti-virals and vaccination as a priority due to not being identified as ‘key workers’.
- To reduce the spread of infection, we are considering asking for volunteers whose sole responsibility will be the care of the sick and dying.
- Bishop Patrick has set up the Pandemic Planning Group, consisting of professionals from various fields, to put in place practical measures to protect the diocese.

1. Why take this seriously?

The Government and big business are preparing to protect the country against the spread of the killer disease, Bird Flu. Some Local Authorities are looking into the possibility of mass burial and using the churches as morgues.

With the spread of the Bird Flu virus, H5N1, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned, “The world is now closer to another influenza pandemic than at any time since 1968, when the last of the previous century’s three pandemics began.’

At present Human Bird Flu is extremely rare. The concern is that the H5N1 virus will mutate into a sustained human-to-human infection.

It may seem strange to some of you to put so much effort into plans that, hopefully, we will never use. But if emergency planning had not been in place before the London bombings of the 7th July, or the Legionnaires disease outbreak in Barrow in 2002, hundreds more people may have died.

Therefore, it is prudent for us to prepare for the pastoral care of the diocese’s 109,145 Catholics during a ‘flu pandemic

2. What is the Diocese’s report ‘Pastoral planning for a Flu Pandemic’?

Bishop Patrick commissioned Deacon Nick Donnelly to prepare the report, ‘Pastoral planning for a Flu Pandemic’, with medical and public health advice from Jim McManus, Assistant Director of a London Primary Care Trust, and adviser to the Bishops’ Conference on Healthcare issues.

The report was described in The Tablet (22 April 2006) in the following terms, ‘It’s scientifically sound and it’s rational and reasonable’.

Ten things you need to know about pandemic flu preparations.

However, it is still a draft report and no final decisions for our diocese have been taken. Contrary to reports in the Catholic press, the report does not pre-judge the decisions we will make, but restricts itself to presenting various scenarios.

3. What are the aims of the report?

The report has three aims:

- a) To evaluate the extent of the health crisis we may be facing;
- b) To set out a range of options to help us make decisions about protecting the health of our community, while at the same time maintaining the pastoral and sacramental life of the Church; and,
- c) To create confidence in our community that the diocese is prepared for a flu pandemic.

The over-riding concern is how best to protect the health of our community, clergy and laity. This obviously must not only include our physical health, but also our spiritual well being. The overall aim is – plan to deliver & hope we never need to use it.

4. What is the scale of the health crisis we may be facing?

Minimum Pandemic: Assuming a Catholic population in the Diocese of Lancaster of 109,145 – with a similar profile to the general public – we can estimate that with an infection rate of 25%, approximately 27,286 will become ill, and using the minimum mortality rate, 101 Catholics may die.

Maximum Pandemic: Assuming a 5% mortality rate from Human Avian Flu, with an infection rate of 25%, we could possibly be facing 1,365 deaths among Catholics in the Diocese of Lancaster alone.

5. How can we protect our parish communities during a flu pandemic?

If government advice remains voluntary and not compulsory, two options facing the diocese are being considered:

Option A. keeping the churches open.

For the healthy and recovered we endeavour to keep our churches open to enable individuals to fulfil their obligation to participate in the Mass, and receive spiritual support and healing during such traumatic events. This will inevitably expose people to the risk of infection from people who are infected but not symptomatic, and who are therefore able to spread infection without realising it. However, the risk of infection for those who do attend can be reduced by setting up infection control and hygiene discipline in our parishes and allocating dedicated clergy for ministry to the sick. Guidance on this from health professionals is being planned which will be distributed at the appropriate time. However, one practical consequence will be the necessity to avoid physical contact, and infection spread, therefore, it is recommended that the sign of peace, reception from the chalice, and communion on the tongue be temporarily suspended during a pandemic.

For those who are ill, suspect they are ill, or in contact with someone who is ill, it is important that they should not attend Mass. This is to protect their well being and the well being of the community.

Option B. closing the churches.

If the government recommends that we do not to go to public gatherings such as football matches or cinemas, then we must consider the suspension of Masses. During the first wave of the pandemic we may have to consider voluntarily closing the churches at its peak for 2-3 weeks to reduce the risk to our community.

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However, in the event, this decision may be taken out of our hands, as under the Civil Contingency Act 2004 the government may restrict movement and public activities. If this occurs, we do not know how long our churches will be compulsorily closed.

6. How will we maintain the sacramental life of the Church?

For both scenarios, we have to face the question of how we maintain the sacramental life of the Church for those who are ill or if the parish churches are closed:

Obligation to participate in the Mass. Following the guidance of canon 1248§2, the diocese is considering the distribution, if necessary, of a Liturgy of the Word booklet to enable the faithful to worship at home.

Confessionals. Even if churches remain open, confessionals will have to be dispensed with, so that priest and penitent can remain a safe distance apart, e.g. the sanctuary could be used.

Funerals. The Government is considering the possible necessity of mass burials during a maximum pandemic. A form of prayer is to be prepared for a graveside service, extrapolating from the Rite of Committal in the *Order of Christian Funerals*.

Baptism and Marriage. During a period of high mortality it is easy to imagine an increased demand for baptism and marriage. In the event that the clergy are incapacitated, it is important that the laity are taught the correct form of baptism (canon 861§2), and informed of the requirements for a true marriage, validly and lawfully contracted in the presence of witnesses (canon 1116 §1). A simple set of instructions is to be prepared for the laity.

Schools. It is likely that schools will be closed early in a pandemic, to stop the spread of infection. Prayer books and catechetical materials are to be prepared to help different age groups cope and make sense of what's going on.

Sacrament of the sick. One of the priorities during a 'flu pandemic will be the need for priests to visit the sick and dying to hear confession, and administer the sacrament of the sick. When someone is no longer sick, but is clearly dying, there are three dimensions to the proper sacramental care for the person and their family: (1) Holy communion as Viaticum, & (2) commendation of the dying – these two dimensions may be completed by a priest, a deacon, or by an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion; (3) Anointing of the Sick – which may be administered by a priest only.

While the clergy have a serious obligation (1003§2) to assist the sick and dying, it would be voluntary for laity to put themselves and their families at risk of infection.

7. How can the priests, deacons, and, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion reduce the risk during home visits?

The diocese takes very seriously the health and well being of all its members. The danger in visiting the sick is that ministers could, through poor hygiene, become reservoirs of infection. The virus could, through sneezing and airborne droplets get onto the clothes of the priests, deacons, and extraordinary ministers and spread. There are infection controls and hygiene disciplines that can reduce risk. Guidance on this is being planned and will be given at the appropriate time.

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8. Will the priests, deacons, and, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion receive anti-virals and vaccination as a priority due to their work with the sick and dying?

No. The Department of Health does not include these as key workers during a flu pandemic that require anti-virals and vaccination as a priority. The best hope for vaccinating priests, deacons, and extraordinary ministers, will be for those who are accredited NHS chaplains or health workers who will receive vaccination through the occupational health function of their NHS Trust.

9. How can we maintain clergy cover in our churches, and provide pastoral care among those infected with flu?

If all the clergy attempt to run parishes and provide pastoral care among those with 'flu, there is a high probability of two things happening: 1) All the clergy will become sick; 2) The clergy – either during the incubation period or not showing symptoms – will infect members of their community.

Therefore, we may want to consider each deanery asking for two or more volunteers among the clergy – depending on the size of the deanery – whose sole responsibility will be the care of the sick and dying. They will have no contact with the rest of the community to avoid spreading the infection. It would be advisable that the volunteers share the same house. If they become sick, or die, then other volunteers may replace them.

In researching the pandemic report practical advice has been obtained from Fr Marciano Baptista SJ, who was one of the volunteers who worked with the sick during the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong. He indicated that during the 2003 SARS outbreak, which infected 1000, and killed 300, 4 priests volunteered to work with SARS patients, and 40 other priests took care of the ordinary sick. Fr. Marciano was quarantined from his community for 14 days after his last contact with SARS patients.

10. What else do I need to know?

- The full draft report is available on the following websites:
http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/citizenship/documents/Pastoral_planning_for_a_flu_pandemic_RevNickDonnelly.doc

And as a pdf at:

http://www.lancasterdiocese.org.uk/bishop/Pastoral_planning_for_a_flu_pandemic_RevNickDonnelly.pdf

- Bishop Patrick has set up the Pandemic Planning Group, consisting of professionals from various fields, including medicine, education, local government, emergency services, and clergy. The remit of the group is to develop and implement practical measures to prepare the Diocese of Lancaster for a 'flu pandemic. It is chaired by Deacon Nick Donnelly, 3 Croft Park Grove, Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, LA13 9NJ. (nickdonnelly@hotmail.com). This is a work in progress. **Your comments, suggestions, and questions are very welcome.**
- One very practical step you could take immediately is to make sure that your parishioner records are up to date – you may find it helpful to undertake a parish census, so that you know exactly the demographics of your community.