COVID-19 Public Policy Report
May 4, 2020

National

- For up-to-date information on the pandemic, see Coronavirus.gov. This website is jointly maintained by the White House, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
- White House unveils reopening plan: President Donald Trump has released Guidelines for Opening Up America Again, a three-phased approach for reopening the US economy. The Guidelines are based on medical indications and were vetted through public health experts.
- Poll says “Open the economy”: A Rasmussen poll conducted April 16–18 found that fifty-one percent of Americans favor reopening the economy and allowing all who are not sick or vulnerable to return to work. Thirty-eight percent of those polled opposed reopening and ten percent were unsure. Urban respondents were evenly divided over reopening (forty-four percent each) but suburban respondents favored return to work by a margin of fifty-one percent to forty-one percent, and rural respondents favored it sixty-four percent to twenty-six percent. The margin of error was +/-2.8 percent.
- AG says “Protect civil liberties:” In a recent memo, Attorney General William Barr instructed US attorneys around the country to “Be on the lookout” for cases where state and local government officials infringe upon constitutional rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. Barr stated: “Many policies that would be unthinkable in regular times have become commonplace in recent weeks, and we do not want to unduly interfere with the important efforts of state and local officials to protect the public. But the Constitution is not suspended in times of crisis. We must therefore be vigilant to ensure its protections are preserved, at the same time that the public is protected.” Barr added that even when elected officials were enforcing reasonable and temporary restrictions, “the First Amendment and federal statutory law prohibit discrimination against religious institutions and religious believers.”
- Harvard returns coronavirus money: After strong criticism, Harvard University has reversed course and announced that it will not accept $8.6 million in federal aid through the CARES Act. The university stated, “We are concerned that intense focus by politicians & others on Harvard in connection with the program may undermine participation in a relief effort.” Harvard’s endowment is approximately $41 billion.
International

- **Italian bishops say “Open the churches:”** The Catholic bishops of Italy are criticizing Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte whose phased lifting of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions do not (so far) include the celebration of public masses. In an April 26th news conference, Conte said that while funerals may take place with a maximum of 15 people, public masses will resume “in the coming weeks.” The bishops responded by reminding government entities of the duty to “distinguish between their responsibility – giving precise indications of a health nature – and that of the Church, called to organize the life of the Christian community.” Public masses in Italy have been suspended since March 8th.

- **Italian police try to stop mass, priest refuses:** On Divine Mercy Sunday, a member of the Italian Carabinieri (police) insisted that a mass in progress be stopped but the priest refused. The mass was taking place at the church of San Pietro Apostolo in Soncino in the province of Cremona, one of the regions of Italy hit hardest by coronavirus. The priest, Father Lino Viola, was fined 680 euros ($735) for non-compliance. Fr. Viola asserted that the fine was not a problem, the real problem was the police’s violation of the sacred liturgy: “Nobody can desecrate the Mass in this way — not even the police. I had to say, ‘Enough.’” A video of the incident is available through the link.

- **Dutch high court OKs euthanizing dementia patients:** The Supreme Court of the Netherlands has ruled that doctors can lawfully euthanize patients with severe dementia as long as the patient had expressed the desire to be euthanized while they were still legally capable of doing so. Cardinal Willem Jacobus Eijk (Utrecht), speaking for the Dutch bishops’ conference, stated that the court’s ruling creates confusion and raises important questions about informed consent, especially for the most vulnerable at the end of life.

- **Brazilian Supreme Court nixes abortion for Zika:** Seven of the eleven members of Brazil’s Supreme Federal Tribunal have voted against decriminalizing abortion for pregnant woman diagnosed with the Zika virus. Abortion is illegal in Brazil but prior Court rulings have held that it is a “non-punishable crime” in cases of rape, proven risk to life of the mother, or when a child is diagnosed with anencephaly. Proponents of decriminalization argued that in 2015 Brazil saw a spike microcephaly—a birth defect characterized by abnormally small heads, brains, and developmental delays—that purportedly occurred after an outbreak of Zika in the northeast regions of the country. Opponents countered by arguing that no causal relationship has been established between the virus and microcephaly.

- **Religious freedom violators:** The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has issued its 2020 annual report which identifies governments that oppress or fail to protect religious liberty as fundamental human right. Notable countries identified as “of particular concern” include China, India, Iran, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, and Saudi Arabia.

Catholic Resources

- **Re-consecration of US to Mary:** On May 1st, Archbishop José Gomez (Los Angeles), President of the USCCB, re-consecrated the United States to the Blessed Virgin Mary in response to the coronavirus pandemic. The act of re-consecration read, in part, “With the love of a Mother and Handmaid, embrace our nation which we entrust and consecrate once again to you, together with ourselves and our families ... Accept with the benevolence of a Mother the act of consecration that we make today with confidence, and help us to be
your Son’s instruments for the healing and salvation of our country and the world.” The bishops of Canada also consecrated their country to Mary on May 1st. The bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean consecrated their nations to Our Lady of Guadalupe on Easter Sunday.

- **Vatican coronavirus task force established:** Pope Francis has set up a [task force](#) to help the Church address economic and social challenges that will arise as COVID-19 lockdowns come to an end. The task force is housed within the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development whose prefect is Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana. The task force’s purpose is to “express the concern and love of the Church for the whole human family vis-a-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, above all via analysis and reflection on the socio-economic and cultural challenges of the future and the proposals for guidelines to tackle them.”

- **Boston creates anointing teams:** The [Archdiocese of Boston](#) has created teams of priests to administer the sacrament Anointing of the Sick to COVID-19 patients. Team members, all volunteers, live together near hospitals and their sole assignment is to be available to administer the sacrament. Speaking to the program, Cardinal Sean O’Malley stated, “This [ministry] is especially comforting to families who are not currently permitted to visit loved ones in the hospital and who are being treated for coronavirus. Our priests consider this to be a blessing in their ministry.” He added that the priests’ visits “have had a positive impact on hospital staff.” Priests wear personal protective equipment (PPE) and perform the anointing with a cotton swab which is dipped in the holy oil and then administered on the patient’s foot.

- **NYC religious communities hit by coronavirus:** Religious communities in the New York City area have been hit hard by COVID-19. The Maryknoll Sisters in Ossining (forty miles from NYC) lost three members to coronavirus and another thirty have tested positive, as have ten staff members. The Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers have also been hit hard as ten priests have died and fifteen others have tested positive. The Missionaries of Charity in The Bronx lost at least two sisters due to COVID-19, including Sr. Francesca who worked with Mother Teresa in Calcutta and was one of the order’s founding members.

- **Trump ‘attends’ mass:** President [Donald Trump](#) participated in Cardinal Timothy Dolan’s (New York) live-streaming mass on Sunday, April 26th. In his homily, the cardinal welcomed Trump saying, “Mr. President, St. Paul in the Bible exhorts us to pray for our leaders and that we do every Sunday, and in these trying days especially it’s one nation under God, beseeching the Almighty’s guidance and strength upon you and your administration as well as on our state and local leadership.”

- **Faith and coronavirus:** A recent [survey](#) from the Pew Research Center indicates how the coronavirus has impacted Americans’ faith. Overall, approximately twenty-four percent of Americans say their faith has grown stronger due to the pandemic while forty-seven percent say it has not changed much. Among Catholics, twenty-seven said their faith has grown stronger, thirty-five percent say it has not changed much, and two percent say it has weakened.

For information about US dioceses that are reopening to administer the sacraments, click [here](#) and [here](#).

Click [here](#) for updated resources from The National Catholic Bioethics Center.
Words of Wisdom

- *Fr. Jean-Marc Fournier, a French priest who saved the Blessed Sacrament and other religious relics during the Notre Dame cathedral fire in 2019:* “There is another phenomenon emerging from this COVID-19 pandemic which will have a long-term impact, and it is the involvement of the clergy in the crisis. More than 100 priests have died in Italy so far, while about 40 priests died in France. These clergymen died heroically, while trying to accompany the faithful in their trial, in the name of a superior principle, that is the love of God."

Of Note

- *Governor Andy Beshear (D) of Kentucky on his decision to veto a bill during the coronavirus pandemic that would have required doctors to try to preserve the life of a child born alive after an attempted abortion:* “I'm just not doing divisive issues right now.”

Sharing the News: If you have public policy news that you would like to share with the NCBC, please contact Joe Zalot at 215-871-2014 or jzalot@ncbcenter.org.

Sharing the Resources: If you enjoy receiving the NCBC’s Public Policy Report and would like to support its continued publication, please consider making a donation to the NCBC.

The National Catholic Bioethics Center webpage, available at http://www.ncbcenter.org/, is a significant resource for bioethics information. NCBC bioethicists are also on-call for consultation twenty-four hours a day, seven days per week, at 215-877-2660.