

KENYA: COVID-19 Guidelines from Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa on Safe Mass Gatherings

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As the pandemic COVID-19, a disease that has been caused by novel Coronavirus spreads across the world and raises concern in various countries, Catholic Church leaders within the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) region have developed precautionary measures to have safe Eucharistic gatherings and also help prevent the spread of the virus which is causing high mortality rate globally. AMECEA Secretariat looked at the various statements in order to capture the main points of similarity and differences.

Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB)

After Kenya confirmed the first case of coronavirus in the country on Thursday, March 12, the KCCB in their collective statement provided pastoral strategies to be used during liturgical celebrations to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

“We, the Catholic Bishops, wish to give some guidance so that our liturgical celebrations and other related gatherings do not facilitate any incidental spread of the Coronavirus,” reads in part the March 14, 2020 statement signed by the General Secretary of KCCB, Very Rev. Fr. Daniel Rono on behalf of the Chairman Archbishop Philip Anyolo.

The Bishops echo the importance of hygiene which the World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes. “We strongly exhort the priests to observe the highest level of hygiene in the liturgical ceremonies. Specifically, we ask them to thoroughly wash their hands with soap and water before any liturgical celebration, and to use soap in the lavabo rite of the Mass to ensure total cleanliness as they come in contact with the bread and wine.”

In another statement dated March 19, the bishops say that “Churches will remain open; they are not closing. They will be the focal point of prayer where you will find solace and strength from God.” Additionally, “The Holy Masses will continue to be celebrated in our Churches but the Bishops' Conference recommends that the Diocesan Bishops grant temporary dispensation from the Sunday obligation for the next three weeks for any Faithful who may need it.”

“However, those who are able to attend Sunday Mass may do so observing all the measures of prudence. At the same time, we ask the Priests to exercise caution in regard to large gatherings, that is, keeping the recommended distance of one metre,” the Prelates said.

They have allowed receiving of the Eucharist on the hand but “with due reverence” since this act will only “continue until the threat of the virus is abated.”

Besides, “We are asking our dear Priests to celebrate Votive Masses of the Mercy of God as provided in the Sacramentary,” the Bishops underscored.

“As we recognize the imminent danger of this pandemic, we, however, request that we avoid any tendencies or attitudes of discrimination and stigmatization of the affected persons,” Archbishop Philip Anyolo concluded, adding that Christians should follow all the prevention measures as given by the Ministry of Health and World Health Organization.”

Zambia Conference of Catholic Bishops (ZCCB)

Before Zambia confirmed its first two cases of COVID-19 in the country, the Bishops Conference (ZCCB) already provided guidelines for preparedness to be safe when conducting liturgical rites and celebrations.

“Cognizant of the fact that some African countries have recorded cases of COVID-19 and in view of the possible outbreak in Zambia, ZCCB is taking a proactive approach,” the Bishops highlighted in a statement signed by the ZCCB president on March 17, Bishop George Cosmas Zumaire Lungu.

The Bishops in Zambia are also open to Eucharistic celebrations but they have exempted the vulnerable persons from attending Mass, asking the Ministers of the Eucharist to take Blessed Sacrament to such persons.

“Vulnerable individuals such as those at particular risk by reason of their age or existing health condition, are exempted from the obligation to attend Mass. Nonetheless, the Ordinary and Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist are hereby exhorted to take the Blessed Sacrament to such while observing high standards of hygiene and other precautionary measures,” the Prelates stated.

Anticipating Paschal Triduum, the Church leaders have discouraged touching the Crucifix during veneration of the cross saying. “Public veneration of relics and the Crucifix/ Cross such as held on Good Friday should NOT be by kissing or physically touching them.”

As stated in the health guidelines by the government of Zambia, the Prelates have “encouraged any person who may be suffering from any form of fever, cough or cold to voluntarily abstain from Eucharistic and other liturgical celebrations until they recover.”

At the same time, “Parishes (to) consider reducing the duration liturgical assemblies gather for worship and the community congregates for other religious activities,” while priests, the religious, catechists and lay leaders to preach messages of hope and follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Catholic Bishops' Conference of Ethiopia (CBCE)

As the number of COVID-19 in Ethiopia increases to six according to the latest report, CBCE has directed that “Parishes will proceed having regular week day Masses with a very limited number of people until further notice is given. However, the bishops encourage to have multiple Masses or open air Masses on Sundays and holidays of obligation, especially those parishes with large number of parishioners through the use of public address system.”

“Churches should be kept open for people who need to pray,” reads the statement signed by the President of CBCE, Archbishop Berhaneyesus Cardinal Souraphel.

Catholics are discouraged from kissing the Crucifix during the way of the cross and also to avoid kissing the hands of the priests.

“Maximum caution and respecting distances between individuals are encouraged to invite Catholics to pray in private and in small groups outside and inside the Churches,” the Bishops have highlighted.

When administering the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Bishops have “advised to do open space confessions rather (than) in confessional box and all forms of blessings by laying on hands and touching is to be suspended.”

They have asked the faithful to observe other regulations provided by the government and concluded, “Finally, we invite all Christians and people of good will to pray consistently to God for the total eradication of the Coronavirus. May our mother Mary intercede for us.”

Uganda Episcopal Conference (UEC)

As many countries within Eastern Africa report cases of COVID-19, Uganda has no confirmed case yet but the UEC has taken precautions already. Echoing similar directives as other Conferences, the statement signed by the UEC chairman, Bishop Joseph Antony Zziwa, has directed that “all the clergy should make the directives from the President and the guidelines from Ministry of Health widely available to the faithful.”

The Prelates explained further that, “Since public gatherings are banned, we urge our clergy, Religious, catechists and laity to refrain from conducting the Stations of the Cross, crusades, worships and retreats of more than 10 people.”

The Prelates discourage spreading rumors and encourage cross-checking of facts about the Coronavirus before disseminating any information.

Episcopal Conference of Malawi (ECM)

As more African countries confirm cases of Coronavirus with at least 35 countries infected according to the latest report, ECM had earlier issued precautionary measures towards preparedness in case the virus reaches the country of Malawi. These were captured our AMECEA's Online Bulletin of March 14, 2020. So far the country has not confirmed any case.