



September 3, 2021

Dear Faith Formation Coordinators, DREs, Pastors, Youth Ministers and Parents,

Over the past several days, the Catholic Schools and Faith Formation offices have heard from people who oppose the mandate issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Health requiring all students and staff in Pre-K-12 schools to wear masks. As you may be aware, we issued a statement on August 20 listing several recommendations for schools entering the 2021-22 academic year. Faith Formation programs have previously announced they would follow the same protocols as Catholic schools. Among them: “All schools will be required to follow mandates that may be issued from government agencies, including masking.”

I stand firmly behind this decision. We are doing this for the health and welfare of our students, volunteers, teachers, staff and coordinators, and our lawyers have confirmed the mandate is a legally binding order.

I am aware of the strong opinions for and against mask wearing. I cannot convince people one way or another in a letter. But after much study and a proven track record from last year, we believe the best option for continuing in-person experiences — a priority educators strongly support — is to follow the guidance of the CDC and the order issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

Although many have expressed gratitude for our decision and have supported their local leaders, I am disappointed in the level of vitriol being used by some who do not support it. Every family in our faith formation outreach is important to us, so I am sorry people are threatening to walk away from this important resource over the approach we are taking to ensure health and safety.

Generations of families, faith formation directors and teachers have made religious education possible in the Diocese of Erie. That legacy continues today because of hard work and commitment on the part of all. Please do not ignore this vital resource. Remember this is a temporary situation and that our recommendations provide enough leeway for schools and faith formation programs to make decisions once the government mandates are lifted.

Until that time, our position on following government mandates is not up for debate. It is essential that we now allow Catholic schools, faith formation programs and religious educators to focus on their priorities, helping students develop into young men and women grow in knowledge, love and faith, prepared to contribute to society with a solid, faith-filled foundation.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Lawrence T. Persico

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie

P.S. On the question of exemptions: It is not possible to use a religious exemption regarding masks, as they are not against the teachings of the Catholic faith. Students with documented medical conditions from a licensed medical professional will need to work directly with program administrators to explore what accommodations can and cannot be made in their school facilities for this purpose.