
Austria: religious services, tougher restrictions due to rise in COVID-19 infections

From yesterday, Monday 21 September, the faithful must wear protective masks covering their mouths and noses at all indoor Catholic services in all the dioceses of Austria. This is the most important of the numerous measures agreed by the churches and religious organisations and the Ministry of Culture last Thursday in an attempt to contain the surge in COVID-19 infections. Another requirement is prevention with the definition of “quotas for special religious celebrations”, whose respect must be guaranteed by an officer in charge of prevention, set up in every diocese. This applies to weddings and funerals, but also to first communions, confirmations and ordinations, as some dioceses explain in their guidelines to parishes. Moreover, the Church’s anti-COVID measures for public worship services maintain the one-metre distancing rule for persons not living in the same household. This rule, which is not tougher for the Catholic Church, has been in force throughout Austria since the time when services and public activities were resumed after the lockdown. The obligation to keep social distancing does not apply “when religious acts are performed”, namely when administering the sacraments. The obligation to cover one’s nose and mouth does not apply to the priest and to the person performing a liturgical service (e.g. reader, singer) if there is sufficient distance from the faithful. When Holy Communion is dispensed, the rules also provide that both the faithful and the ministers should wear face masks covering their mouths and noses.

Valentina Bombelli