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## Christmas festivities: the recommendations of the Commission's Remain Safe Strategy

The "Message to the Christian communities in times of pandemic" released on November 24 by the Permanent Episcopal Council (CEP) of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI), calls on Christian communities to keep continued vigilance and take the necessary precautions to avoid Covid-19 contagion during liturgical services: "Liturgies and community events require special attention and caution. But this should not discourage us. Over the past months we saw that it's possible to hold liturgical services in full safety, in compliance with established regulations." With equal emphasis, the Bishops' Conference National Office for Social Communications released a clarifying statement a few days later, assuring that the Italian Church, "through its institutional bodies, will monitor the epidemiological situation and analyze ways to officiate Christmas celebrations in full compliance with safety standards and regulations, as has been the case so far." *Italian churches showed a widespread sense of responsibility, guided by the notion that people's physical health comes first.* At the same time, due care is taken to ensure that the Christian faith is lived out also in the community, an equally necessary option in these times of pandemic and isolation. In this respect the attendance of faithful at Eucharistic celebrations on weekdays and holidays is governed by the regulations set out in the protocol signed by the Italian Bishops' Conference with the Italian Government last May, implemented by groups of volunteers (or via local accords with the Civil Protection or other organizations or confraternities) tasked with measuring temperatures in front of church entrances, ensuring that masks are properly worn and that children, young people and adults sanitize their hands. Church seating - chairs or benches - is spaced in accordance with anti-Covid regulations. Priests and deacons take the same precautions at the altar during the religious rituals and the distribution of Holy Communion; choirs are restricted to groups of a few singers, performing in compliance with physical distancing and mandatory use of masks... In most churches the altar and the spaces where the congregation gather are sanitized at the end of every religious function. In these circumstances, a news report (La Repubblica, 30 November) anticipated that the EU Commission plans to issue a set of non-binding guidelines on pandemic prevention, touching on some aspects related to religious celebrations. *The "Remain Safe Strategy" is expected to be announced on Wednesday, December 2, featuring a set of recommendations aimed at a harmonization of anti-Covid precautionary rules during the upcoming Christmas holidays across all 27 EU countries:* the risk of a third wave scenario is under everyone's eyes to see. Hence everyone's daily life - including work, school, shopping, social life ... - will have to respond to health protection requirements in a responsible manner. Recommendations include, for example, that students in remote learning mode should not return to school before Christmas, extending Christmas holidays to the first week of January. However, it should be remembered that the Commission's recommendations cover all EU countries currently confronting the coronavirus epidemic from different health, social and economic perspectives. Thus, the Commission could - and here I must use the conditional as the "Remain Safe Strategy" is still being defined - suggest that "mass gathering events" (including Holy Mass) be subject to strict safety measures, and eventually replaced with online broadcasting. With regard to religious services, in addition to physical distancing and masks, the EU Commission could recommend that specific spaces be created for individual families (e.g., with grouped seating) and perhaps request the cessation of church choirs. *It is necessary to wait for the final version of the document, although in the knowledge that these rules are substantially already applied in the life of the local Christian communities in Italy.*