

Archdiocese prepares for flu pandemic

Note: This is a corrected version of the story originally posted Sept. 8.

Between fasting and holy water, churchgoers in the Archdiocese of Baltimore may want to add another item to their Mass ritual: the liberal use of a hand sanitizer.

That was among the tips shared by public health experts Sept. 4 at Good Samaritan Hospital, where a Pandemic Flu Meeting for parishes briefed approximately 75 people about the H1N1 virus and precautions that should lessen the impact of a strain of influenza that has the potential to infect one in three Americans.

"We need to be in dialogue with each other," said Auxiliary Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, who welcomed participants and led an opening prayer.

Parish nurses and pastors like Redemptorist Father John Kingsbury of St. Mary in Annapolis heard presentations and recommendations. A recurring theme was the education of parishioners, many of whom will have to re-evaluate some of their habits, including the obligation to attend Mass.

"We are in the people business, and people spread this virus," said registered nurse Bernie Miller, an infection preventionist for Stella Maris and parishioner of St. Ursula in Parkville. "Folks need to stay home if they are sick, no matter what the illness is.

"Begin scripting the stay at home speech. Get it down, and make sure that everyone in the parish is on the same page."

St. Ignatius in Hickory parishioner Paul L. Hewett Jr., the Deputy Director of the Center for Integrated Emergency Preparedness for Argonne National Laboratory, provided a graphic example of the toll H1N1 could take.

"Think of M&T Bank Stadium full," Hewett said, "and none of those people surviving," Hewett said.

The most severe prediction of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology is 90,000 deaths in the United States, with the majority being under 50 years of age.

Later, Miller reminded participants of the perils of a normal flu season.

"Let's keep it in perspective," she said. "Annually, 36,000 die from (seasonal) flu."

Miller encouraged parishes and schools to build on suggestions the archdiocese made last spring, during an earlier spike of H1N1, especially the use of hand sanitizers.

"There should be hand sanitizer for extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion," she said. "Don't assume that everyone knows what waterless hand sanitizer is."

Miller stressed regular disinfection of hands, and daily disinfection of surfaces from doorknobs to sinks and toilets.

It's expected that H1N1, commonly known as swine flu, will peak in October, before a vaccine is readily available. Until that is available, Miller stressed getting a seasonal flu shot.

Both Miller and Hewett underlined the importance of emergency preparedness, from staffing Mass to sharing responsibility at the parish level.

"How many of you have a parish secretary who holds total control of information?" Hewett asked. "Share information. ... This is not like a snow day, and protective action must be put into place. This isn't just about the flu pandemic, this is a teaching moment about what to do for every disaster."

Both Miller and Hewett mentioned the possibility of school closings and a drop in collections – a strong advertisement for Faith Direct, the direct deposit method.

For more information, go to www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu

Correction

"Archdiocese prepares for flu (CR, Sept. 10) incorrectly reported the position of Stella Maris infection preventionist Bernie Miller on the suggestions the archdiocese

made last spring, during an earlier spike of H1N1 influenza. Miller endorses the use of hand sanitizers by extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. She did not endorse the suggestion that parishes have no physical contact during the sign of peace and limit the Eucharist in wine form.

The Catholic Review regrets the error.”