

# Religious Leaders Preach Caution Amid Flu Outbreak

As the flu outbreak spreads across 48 states, some religious leaders are advising their flocks to take precautions, but others say avoiding infection is just a matter of common sense.

Several Catholic dioceses, including Manchester, N.H., Boston and New York, are advising priests to consider not offering the shared chalice of consecrated wine at Holy Communion at Masses. Communicants would only receive the consecrated wafer.

In addition, Manchester Bishop Peter Libasci had other suggestions, reported *The Eagle Tribune* of North Andover, Mass.

"The faithful should be encouraged to share the Sign of Peace without touching hands or kissing," he said. "This may be done with smiles and a bow of the head in reverence to one another."

In Boston this month Mayor Thomas Menino declared a public health emergency as hospital emergency rooms were overwhelmed with flu patients. The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts has recommended "reasonable precautions," such as avoiding "self-intinction" during Communion, during which congregants at the altar rail dip the wafer into the wine.

"Having hand washing and sanitizing supplies readily at hand in church facilities, and encouraging their use, is also a good idea," said the diocese.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in the first week of January the flu had reached epidemic proportions. As of Jan. 12, it has killed 29 children under age 18 this season. Some school districts have closed for

several days to prevent the spread of the virus and many hospitals are limiting visitors. The CDC said the flu season has peaked unusually early and the outbreak has led to shortages of vaccine.

"I told everybody to get the flu shot," said Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld of Ohev Sholom synagogue, an Orthodox congregation in Washington, D.C.

Shaking hands is usually an essential part of an Orthodox service, after congregants come to the pulpit to read the Torah, or when the rabbi greets members, said Judah Isaacs, director of community engagement for the New York-based Orthodox Union. However, the OU, an umbrella group for Orthodox congregations, hasn't issued any flu-prevention guidelines, he said.

Rabbi Gershon C. Gewirtz, of the Young Israel of Brookline Orthodox congregation near Boston, said he made an announcement last weekend that "people might prefer not to shake hands." Among the alternatives he offered were nodding graciously, or wrapping part of a garment around the hand.

Some congregations are continuing practices put in place in 2009, when the outbreak of the H1N1 flu, or "swine flu," prompted changes in worship.

At St. John's Episcopal Church in Larchmont, N.Y., there have been several Communion stations since 2009, allowing congregants to choose whether to share the chalice or not, said the Rev. N. Chase Danford.