

# From the Archives

## *The influenza epidemic of 1918*



MINNEAPOLIS MORNING TRIBUNE, 10/19/1918

BY HEATHER CRAIG

**A**s we explore new ways to connect with and serve our parishioners and neighbors during the pandemic, I was curious how The Basilica had responded to the Influenza Epidemic of 1918, in a world without Zoom or livestreaming or even commercial radio.

The H1N1 influenza strain we know as the Spanish Flu initially came to the United States from Europe with our returning soldiers and nurses. The first cases in Minnesota were reported at Fort Snelling. The *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* reported on September 20, 1918, that there was “no Spanish Influenza in the city” though health commissioner Dr. H. M. Guildford expected this to change. Ten days later, on September 30, 150 cases were already reported in the city.

Was our rector at the Pro-Cathedral of Saint Mary Fr. Thomas Cullen alarmed? Apparently not.

In the announcements for Sunday, September 22, liturgies, classes and meetings continued as usual. The Red Cross ladies were requested to step up their efforts, and Fr. Cullen relayed concern that the school was falling short of its goals for War Bonds.

But case numbers continued to grow at an alarming rate, and at midnight on Saturday, October 12, an order by the city health department closed schools, churches, dance halls, pool halls, movie theaters—all public gathering spaces—to check the spread of the epidemic.

There was no announcements entry for Sunday, October 13. This is the only verified Sunday The Basilica has been closed completely for Mass in its history.

But that week, church leaders and members of the health and hospital committee of the city council met and agreed upon a modification of the closing order which may sound familiar:

- **Not more than 25% capacity at each service**
- **Every alternate pew to be left vacant, with each pew occupied at half the usual capacity**

Most of the large Protestant churches of the city opted to stay closed, calling instead for home worship. Fr. Cullen announced extra Masses would be held, and urged parishioners to attend the early Masses. Mass was held in the church at 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11AM, with Mass also in the “sub auditorium” (the unfinished church basement) at 9, 10 and 11AM.

*“We recommend the strongest observance of the regulations suggested by the department of health—to resist the progress of the influenza epidemic.”*

— Fr. Thomas Cullen, 1918

## Do This and Foil Germ of Influenza

**Avoid all crowds, especially in enclosed places, such as street cars.**

**Keep away from persons who cough or sneeze. Do not cough or sneeze without first covering your mouth.**

**Have all the fresh air possible. Sleep with the windows open, work with them open, but be sure to wear warm clothing. Keep feet dry.**

**Use individual drinking cups, discard them when used once, and avoid “community” towels.**

**Eat plenty of nourishing food.**

**Do not credit or spread hearsay reports on the epidemic.**

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In the announcements for Sunday, October 20, Fr. Cullen was clear:

“We recommend the strongest observance of the regulations suggested by the department of health—to resist the progress of the influenza epidemic.

1. Open windows
2. Cleanliness
3. Avoidance of crowds
4. Use of face masks when ministering to the sick.”

Parochial and public schools remained closed for five weeks. When they reopened November 18, extra doctors and nurses were deployed to the public schools to help monitor for the disease. The students had a vacation. Not so much the teachers.

“Virtually all the teachers who remained in the city have devoted their time to caring for the sick. They have gone into the homes in which it was impossible to get nurses and have worked under doctors’ orders and under their own initiative, in many instances serving as both nurse and cook,” the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* reported.

The reopening of public life coincided with the end of the war, and Minneapolis citizens thronged the streets, churches, and auditoriums to celebrate the victory, all precautions tossed aside. The final toll, in just the last three months of 1918: 125,000 cases of influenza were reported in Minnesota, with 7,260 deaths, 2,000 in the city of Minneapolis.

For more information on the 1918 pandemic, I recommend the influenza-archives.org—a project of the University of Michigan, as well as an excellent article in MNopedia by Mary Laine. ✚

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