

March 12, 2020

Dear Faithful of the Diocese of Madison,

There is a great deal of information coming out with regard to the current COVID-19 outbreak, but a great deal remains unknown. What is clear, based on worldwide data and the best advice from public health experts, is that it is important for us to do what we can to diminish opportunities for the spread of this virus. It is certainly important that we not panic and that we keep our trust firmly in the Lord, His promise to remain with us, and our ultimate promise of Eternal Life. It is also important for us to take precautions to protect the most vulnerable in our communities. Currently the best steps we can take in that regard seem to involve creating a sort of firewall, diminishing the opportunities for the spread of this virus, while some degree of containment is still possible.

Therefore, in addition to the directions and suggestions already given to pastors, I feel it is now a good time to remind the faithful of a few things and to offer a dispensation.

While it's often forgotten, even though we are encouraged to receive more frequently, no Catholic is obliged to receive Holy Communion more than one time per year (specifically, at least once during the Easter Season).<sup>1</sup> As such, if at any Mass (whether during this scare or at other times) a member of the faithful is concerned with reception of communion due to their being immunocompromised or to a sense that they may be ill, they should not feel obliged to receive communion sacramentally. Those who do not receive communion may still participate faithfully in the true sacrifice that is being offered and to make a spiritual communion – uniting themselves spiritually with Our Lord and with the whole Church.

Attending Mass on Sundays and holy days is a serious obligation, but those who cannot attend Mass due to illness or other grave reasons are not bound by this obligation. To go a step further, however, **I am issuing a decree, dispensing everyone in the Diocese of Madison from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation until further notice from me.** This means that all Catholics are permitted to miss Mass on Sundays for the foreseeable future, without being concerned that they are neglecting their minimal duties to assist at Mass.

This is not to say that the faithful are prohibited from attending Mass – no one is obligated to use this dispensation. However, it is encouraged that everyone takes seriously this dispensation and take liberal advantage of it, keeping in mind also the recommendation from the Wisconsin Department of Health to avoid large community gatherings – particularly large intergenerational

**O F F I C E O F T H E B I S H O P**

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gatherings - at this time. In a particular way, we encourage the elderly and those who are immunocompromised not to attend Mass.

Obviously, I highly encourage those who decide not to attend Mass to keep up their lives of prayer. In fact, while I am not binding the faithful in this regard, I highly encourage that those people who do not attend Mass undertake some other pious practice in place of Mass. Examples of the types of practices include prayerfully watching the Mass, either televised or on various streaming options, or reciting the rosary or the Liturgy of the Hours.

At the same time, I strongly urge – very strongly, in fact – that priests do not stop saying Masses. The Eucharistic Sacrifice is the source and summit of the Christian life. It is the representation of Christ’s Sacrifice on the Cross. It is the most powerful prayer that we can offer now, and we, as the Church, should carry on this prayer. It may make sense for priests to reduce their Mass schedules, but the reduced schedules should be clearly advertised. Further, priests are encouraged to offer the Mass at least daily – even if one is not publicly scheduled and even if none of the people are present.

For the days on which the liturgical norms permit, I encourage priests to offer regularly a “Mass for Various Occasions,” particularly #45 “For the Sick” or any options of #48 “In Any Need.” For Sunday Masses, the Masses of Lent still are to be prayed.

I also invite all of the faithful to offer particular prayers for our communities and for our world during this period of health crisis. In a particular way, I would encourage us to remember the intercession of the patron of our diocese, St. Raphael, who is also a patron of the sick and of healthcare workers, and whose very name means, “God heals.” In addition, at the conclusion of this document, I will include a prayer of intercession to Our Lady, drawn from a traditional chant sung in “times of pestilence,” which I encourage to be recited.

### **Uniting while “distancing”**

The phrase “social distancing” seems to be popular to describe the move for individuals to stay home and avoid crowds and other gatherings. However, while we are considering social distancing, I take this opportunity to remind all of us that, no matter the distance or our decision not to gather physically, we are never alone. The Lord is always with us and among us. And, so long as we are united to Him, we are alive in His Body, the Church. In this way, we may create “social distance,” but deepen our corporate closeness in Him.

With events being cancelled and work hours reduced, we should be communing more frequently in prayer with our God, remaining in mystical communion with Him and the Universal Church, and always remembering our duty to charity. We should not close in upon ourselves, but continue to reach out – even if over the phone or electronic means – to check in with one another, to reconnect, and to attend to the needs of our neighbors as we are able. Consider this moment a moment of opportunity.

### **Catholic Schools**

The Office of Catholic Schools has been in constant communication with individual Catholic schools and will continue to communicate, while also monitoring the various resources at their

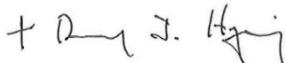
disposal for best practices (which seem to change by the hour). Catholic school families should expect ongoing communication from their school administrators.

### **Other Events**

In terms of parish and school events that are not Masses and do not relate to the instruction of students, it is encouraged that each parish and school consider the cancellation of other events – particularly those events that are easily cancelable in the next few days.

Please know of my fervent prayers for you all. Let us rejoice in knowing the goodness of the Lord and let us continue to pray for and support one another.

Sincerely in Christ,

  
+Donald J. Hying  
Bishop of Madison

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### **A Prayer in Times of Pestilence**

The Star of Heaven that nourished the Lord drove away the plague of death which the first parents of man brought into the world. May this bright Star now vouchsafe to extinguish that foul constellation whose battles have slain the people with the wound of death.

O most pious Star of the Sea, preserve us from pestilence; hear us, O Lady, for Thy Son honors Thee by denying Thee nothing. Save us, O Jesus, for whom Thy Virgin Mother supplicates Thee.

V: Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.

R: That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) #2042; *Code of Canon Law* (CIC), Can. 920