



May 9, 2020
Vigil of Fifth Sunday of Easter

Dear Friends in Christ,

For these weeks of pandemic self-discipline practices, we may have at times felt left out of the community where sacraments are celebrated. Yet my hope is that we all have come to deeper belief that God's Spirit—the Spirit of the Risen Jesus—seeks out where we are, as we are.

The coronavirus contagion has afforded us plenty of chances to give witness that we are a prophetic people in Christ. But let's be honest: the live-streaming Masses, even more than the Zoom and FaceTime encounters with loved ones and colleagues—are far from fully satisfying. Nothing less than actual reception of Holy Communion in the context of the Mass that is both source and summit of Christ's abundant life can allow us to sigh and say, "Ah, home at last!"

At this writing, and with the Feast of God's Spirit at Pentecost approaching on the last day of May, it remains uncertain when that glorious day when we are able to regather and participate in public Mass—and celebrate baptisms, weddings, funerals, confirmation and other sacraments as a full community--will occur. God willing, it will arrive very soon, based on a reasonable decline in the incidence of COVID-19 in our part of Iowa. Our regathering task force composed of both priests and lay people has been hard at work to help outline the preparations and conditions in our churches that we must prudently observe in order to protect as much as reasonably possible the physical and spiritual well-being of our Des Moines Diocese family.

Following this letter is a brief information document from the task force that should give you an overall sense of our Phase 1 plan for regathering for Mass. Note well that after I make the determination, and with your local pastor's discernment and decision that appropriate precautions are in place, we will first resume periodic weekday Masses (Monday-Saturday morning). Further details about liturgical practices have been shared with the priests, and will be communicated to everyone in the near future. Eventually, we will move into Phase 2 and resume Saturday evening and Sunday Masses. Even when we do so, please know that with respect to the vulnerable members of our communities whom we want to protect and not spread the virus, the SUNDAY MASS OBLIGATION REMAINS SUSPENDED.

I pray that all of us—myself included—will charitably embrace the gradual manner in which we resume a Eucharistic rhythm of life, for reasons of necessary social distancing and due diligence in cleaning and restoring our churches to a safe environment each time we gather for Mass. We cannot all rush the altar at the same time, heedless of our neighbor whose holy longing is equal to our own.

May God's Spirit, the Spirit of charity and abundant life, the Spirit of a prophetic, priestly people, be with us where we now are, and where God will have us be: united as one Body, more than ever before.

Faithfully in Christ,

Most. Rev. William M. Joensen, Ph.D.
Bishop of Des Moines

Information for the public:

While we continue to wait for a time when it is safe to resume publicly celebrated Masses, we are making preparations.

1. The diocese has developed a plan for the resumption of public weekday (Monday-Saturday morning) Masses. This plan has been distributed to all parishes so that they can prepare. Public weekday and Sunday Masses currently remain suspended. The diocese and parishes will communicate clearly when we deem it appropriate to resume public weekday Masses.
2. All diocesan parishes will most likely not resume public weekday Masses at the same time. This is due to various situations in our counties, and the fact that some parishes may not be able to meet all required safety guidelines at the same time.
3. Individual parishes will only be allowed to resume public weekday Masses when all required criteria are met. As a general summary, our plan consists of the following:
 - a. Social distancing must be maintained throughout the Mass.
 - b. The worship space must be thoroughly disinfected between every Mass, following the cleaning guidelines prepared by the diocese, which are based on CDC guidance.
 - c. Efforts are made to make the Mass as hygienic as possible, while respecting the integrity of the liturgy.
4. The diocese is tracking county specific data, to try to discern when it is prudent to resume public weekday Masses. We are being guided by the national guidelines for reopening, which direct us to watch for a 14 day decrease in positive COVID-19 tests, or a 14 day decrease in the percentage of positive COVID-19 tests.

It is everyone's earnest desire to resume public worship together as soon as prudentially possible. When public worship does resume, please remember:

1. Participating at Mass is a health risk for any individual. For those who do not attend Mass during this time God's infinite grace and mercy remain abundantly available.
2. The Sunday obligation remains suspended, and that the elderly, vulnerable individuals, individuals who live with vulnerable individuals, and those who are ill or have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 like symptoms should not attend Mass.
3. For those who will attend Mass, please cultivate an occasional presence, and not a daily presence. This is an act of charity toward others, as it can allow more people to participate in daily Mass and better serves the common good.
4. Only attend Mass at their own parish. Traveling to neighboring parishes creates a greater health risk for all, and hinders the diocese in its efforts to make the sacraments publicly available in the safest way possible.