



DIOCESE OF DES MOINES

Pastoral Message
March 17, 2020
Bishop William Joensen

Dear Priests, Deacons, Religious Sisters and Brothers, and Members of the Faithful,

In the face of the unfolding coronavirus COVID-19 epidemic, we are moved to fervent prayer and renewed trust in the Lord of Life. We petition God that all people might be delivered from harm and that those who have been most greatly affected through death, illness, or loss of livelihood might know Christ's compassion and restoration to peace and stability.

There are several guidelines I want to communicate to you; all **guidelines are effective immediately until further notice**:

1. Sunday weekend Masses and daily Masses are NOT to be celebrated in parish churches until further notice. An exception may be made if the parish has the capacity to broadcast the Mass to an electronic audience, and that ONLY the priest and any assisting minister(s) may be present for the Mass. Parish priests will continue to celebrate daily Mass as they are ordinarily enjoined to do, but without a congregation unless performed under the conditions specified in the previous statement.
2. Parish churches may remain open at the discretion of the pastor for visits and individual devotional prayer during the week and on weekends (with the presumption that heightened housekeeping and hygienic practices are observed). A set of recommended means for persons to draw close to God and his Church in prayer and spiritual presence is will be available in a separate document; further spiritual opportunities and resources may be provided by local parish staffs.
3. Funeral Masses may be celebrated with less than 10 persons present. Nuptial Masses already scheduled may be celebrated with the 10 person limit; ideally, these Masses should be rescheduled after government leaders give the "all clear" notice. Any and all other public ceremonies should be rescheduled.
4. Distribution of communion in parishes or health care institutions is strictly subject to the directives and policies of authorities charged with oversight of those institutions, and may well be prohibited. In danger of death, Viaticum may be distributed by a health care professional as well as a member of the clergy or recognized Eucharistic minister—again, if in accord with institutional policies.
5. Other sacraments (Baptism in cases of serious illness or other pastoral need, Confession and Anointing of the Sick) may not be celebrated in common, but only individually at the priest's discretion with serious pastoral necessity. Standard health norms should be respected (e.g., use of a screen or confessional space where appropriate physical distance of six feet will be observed and with hygienic cleaning after each penitent; other protective clothing measures for anointing of persons who are obviously sick). **The conditions for administration of general absolution are NOT present, and to gather for this purpose defeats the aim to minimize spread of coronavirus COVID-19.**
6. Parish meetings or events where parishioners physically gather (e.g., fish fry dinners, Feastday gatherings, confirmation and other religious faith formation) are to be CANCELLED unless an electronic means of engagement is available.

7. The Scrutinies for catechumens, in accord with provision n. 20 of the Christian Initiation Ritual, are hereby dispensed. You will be receiving practical suggestions from the Worship and Evangelization and Catechesis offices for optional ways of celebrating Initiation Rites (cf. n. 9 below).
8. The Chrism Mass, originally scheduled for 7 PM on Friday, April 3, 2020, will instead be celebrated in simpler form (e.g., absent a Diocesan Chorale with only ministers and select regional representatives present) on a day and location to be determined. No general public participation will be allowed; the Holy Oils will be distributed to individual parishes sometime following this liturgy.
9. Please stay tuned for guidelines pertaining to Holy Week liturgies, including the Sacred Triduum, and Easter Sunday, as well as celebration of First Communion and Confirmations during the Easter Season. It is highly likely that Triduum liturgies will be restricted only to assisting ministers with the option of broadcasting; Initiation Sacraments for catechumens and candidates will occur, but likely in a different manner. All parish First Communion and Confirmation Masses should be considered postponed until further notice; more information will be forthcoming from Pastoral Center offices in the days and weeks ahead.

Spiritual Reflection

On the Friday after Ash Wednesday, in the first reading of Mass, the prophet Isaiah challenged God's people: "Would that today you might fast so as to make your voice heard on high!" (Is. 58:4). With various government directives that citizens refrain from assembling in larger numbers, and my ensuing decision to cancel all public Masses in the Des Moines Diocese and to dispense the faithful from the Sunday obligation, we find ourselves forced to fast from Eucharist and in other areas of our lives in ways we would not willingly choose.

The Spirit-given gifts of faith and hope endure until we see the Lord face-to-face, and we must rely on these gifts in this time of crisis and trial more than ever. With the Psalmist, we recall what happened to the Israelites: "A plague broke out among them. Then Phinehas rose to intervene, and the plague was brought to a halt. This was counted for him as a righteous deed for all generations to come" (Ps. 106:29-31).

With living faith and trust in God, and in solidarity with our Holy Father Pope Francis in his directive for the Diocese of Rome, you are invited to join together as a Diocese of Des Moines to observe a special day of fast, abstinence, and prayer. I propose that those who are ordinarily bound to fast (only one full meal, taking less at other meals) and abstain from meat on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday would offer this same sacrifice on **Friday, 27 March 2020**. This is a voluntary invitation, not obligatory.

We further magnify our prayers as priests may offer Masses from the Roman Missal "for the sick," and join with Mary, the Mother of God, in praying the Rosary, knowing that is a powerful instrument to overcome oppressive forces in the world, including disease. As we fast from shared participation at Mass, we offer all that we do during these trying days in the spirit of St. Paul: "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Col. 1:24).

Holy Mary, Comfort of the Sick, pray for us. St. Joseph, Patron of the Church, pray for us. Holy Archangels Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel, pray for us. Ss. Roch, Frances of Rome, and Aloysius Gonzaga, pray for us. St. Patrick, pray for us!

Please know of my own steadfast prayers and care for you all, relying on the grace to remain

Faithfully in Christ,

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