



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
DIOCESE OF MANCHESTER

May 2, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I write to update you on the COVID-19 situation as it applies to the liturgical life of our Diocese.

There have been many developments in New Hampshire since I wrote to you on March 17 and announced that the public celebration of the Mass would be suspended due to the increasing presence of the Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19. In New Hampshire as of this writing, 81 of our citizens have died due to the virus. Families have had to leave a loved-one at the door of an emergency room because of the necessary safety precautions at hospitals. Healthcare workers are under enormous pressure as they seek to avoid this virus, provide the highest levels of care, and also comfort patients at the end of life when family cannot be present.

The priests of our Diocese continue to celebrate Mass for you and for your intentions every day. I am grateful to our priests who have so quickly adapted the manner in which they offer pastoral care in these difficult times. And I am grateful to you for your continued dedication to your pastors and your parishes, and for turning to your faith in a time of uncertainty.

As we have been doing since the beginning of the pandemic in New Hampshire, we have utilized all available information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services to guide our decisions in the Diocese of Manchester.

Yesterday, Governor Chris Sununu extended the State Stay-at-Home Order until May 31, 2020. Though positive signs indicate the virus has not spread to the same level as it could have if a stay-at-home order not been in place, the data shows that significant numbers of our fellow citizens continue to test positive for, and die from, COVID-19. Our neighbors in Massachusetts also are experiencing a greater impact as the virus spreads far faster in our more populous bordering state.

Given this information, for the time being I am keeping in place the decisions already implemented in this Diocese, specifically those pertaining to public celebrations of the Mass. I make this decision knowing how difficult it is to continuously be separated from the Eucharist. The decision to suspend the public celebration of the Mass was very difficult, and I am still in pain alongside you today.

As Catholics, however, we must have a heightened sense of responsibility to act prudently and to be mindful of the safety of others, especially those who are most vulnerable. Though some among us may feel they can participate in the Mass because they do not have symptoms of the virus, the medical evidence is clear that even a person who appears healthy may carry and spread the virus and put others at risk perhaps days later. I speak several times each week with the team

directing our Catholic Charities nursing homes and I am proud of the work they are doing to provide the highest level of protection for residents. I know we must remain vigilant, especially to safeguard the most vulnerable who are entrusted to our care, as well as all those who are working 24 hours per day to keep our brothers and sisters safe and well.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the enduring love of God. Were we to gather together because of how much we ourselves want to share in this sacrament, even though we knew that we might be putting other people at risk, we would be serving as a *counter-sign* to what the Eucharist is about. The early Christians were willing to die to receive the Bread of Life, but they would not have been willing to send innocent people to their deaths in the process.

While I am not prepared to resume public celebration of Mass at this time, we are actively planning for that day in the future, for it will come. Together with the priests of the Diocese and my staff, I have been considering when and how Catholic churches in the Diocese will begin public gatherings again. The preparations include how to maintain social distancing in pews, how to limit capacity as we gradually gather back together again (such as adding additional Masses, as needed), and the procedures for the distribution of Holy Communion. These are preparations for a gradual re-entry attentive to public health, but I also envision a call to re-enter into the Mystery of Faith with a renewed fervor. Not unlike Advent's active "waiting," I have commissioned our priests to re-read the General Instruction of the Roman Missal so that they can engage you, our Faithful, in a deeper reverence, a spiritual rather than emotional fulfillment, a true Holy Communion of the soul's deepest awareness of the Divine Presence for when we do return. So while the time is not yet right, and I cannot tell you the hour or the day, please know that I am planning for when we will join together once more and the glorious reunion we will have.

Seeking the intercession of Christ, the Divine Physician, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter A. Libasci".

Most Reverend Peter A. Libasci
Bishop of Manchester