

My Friends,

I would like to briefly address some of your concerns regarding Coronavirus (COVID-19).

Firstly, we should avoid a state of panic. Currently, there are only 26 confirmed cases of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the State of New Jersey. And, it has not proved deadly outside of the elderly and those with pre-existing pulmonary issues. For those who are a part of these at-risk groups, while there is currently no real risk to your health in our area, if the circumstances change in the future then I will dispense your attendance at Sunday Masses. But, at this time, I do not feel this is necessary and taking such an action would only contribute to unnecessary fear. Thus, I would like to encourage people to not fear. The precautionary and preventative measures taken by the Diocese of Paterson come from our love for our parishioners, not to engender fear. St. Augustine speaks of fear as ultimately having to be forced-out of our hearts and replaced by love when he says: “Fear is the enemy of love”. The Eucharist is the “Sacrament of Love” and as such is our nourishment with love that removes from our hearts: fear. God tells us in the Scriptures: “Be not afraid.” He tells us this 366 times. That’s once a day and one extra when we are really needing it. Today, I tell you: “Be not afraid.” Continue to receive the Eucharist, because it is the Sacrament that replaces fear with love and provides us the clarity of thought to avoid unnecessary panic. You can find Bishop Serratelli’s thoughts on this topic here: <https://bishopserratelli.rcdop.org/news/a-pandemic-of-a-disease-versus-an-epidemic-of-fear>.

Secondly, there is little to no concern of spreading the Coronavirus if people practice common sense and proper hygiene. It is for this reason that people who are sick or showing symptoms of illness are dispensed from their Sunday Obligation and are requested to stay home. Furthermore, if people practice proper hygiene and don’t touch each other, then there would likewise not be a strong concern for the spreading of germs. Remember, to pray the “Lord’s Prayer” when washing your hands as this is the length needed to properly sanitize your hands.

Regarding your concern for the administration of Holy Communion, there are the following possibilities:

1) Considering the hygienic measures being taken by the priest, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion and, hopefully, the entire parish community, you can confidently receive the Eucharist at Mass in the usual fashion.

2) During this period of concern regarding the Coronavirus, anyone concerned of contracting the virus can remain in their seats at Mass and make a spiritual act of Communion, which brings with it many of the spiritual effects of receiving the Eucharist without actual reception of the Eucharist.

Needless to say, for those who are well and unless the diocesan bishop suspends the celebration of Masses, we are all obliged to still attend Sunday Mass. Yet, no one has to receive the Eucharist save once a year during Easter.

Lastly, I would like to encourage you to continue giving to the parish even if you are unable to attend Mass on a particular Sunday due to illness. Our parish still needs your support in order to pay its usual monthly bills and provide for its operations. Our primary source of income is the Sunday Collection. You can contribute online: <https://giving.parishsoft.com/app/giving/our209221>, or by sending in an envelope. Our website will be updated to address any developments: <https://olqpbranchville.org>. I thank you for your continued support of our parish, the Best parish in Sussex County! I look forward to seeing you all at the St. Patrick's Dinner and at Sunday Masses!

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Philip-Michael