

My Dear Friends,

May the love of God the Father, the grace of God the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) is certainly an epidemic that we must treat with due respect in virtue of the gravity of its nature. I want to continue to exhort everyone to practice prudent and preventative measures. Again, if you are sick, showing symptoms of illness, have a pre-existing cardio-pulmonary issue, a deficient immune system either by illness or advanced age, or living with someone who has any of these issues which could compound one's ability to fight the Coronavirus (COVID-19), I am not merely requesting, but I am requiring that such people stay home from church and take the proper measures to safeguard their health.

In order to continue to provide a safe and healthy environment at our church, I am airing out the church every morning when it is opened-up and I am wiping down all of the chairs with Lysol/Clorox disinfecting wipes. I don't want anyone to think that I am not taking seriously the concerns that we all should have regarding the Coronavirus (COVID-19) in accord with due prudence.

Echoing my comments at Masses this weekend and in my previous letters, while I exhort everyone to vigilance, I also ask people to please keep calm. Fear is never a legitimate motivation from which to act. Please accept my comments not as a lack of appreciation for everyone's legitimate concerns, but as an encouragement to help keep us all calm amidst a time of real crisis. In other words: "*Keep calm and carry-on*". I would like to also share with you some quotes to just keep in mind and which will hopefully bring you some encouragement that were given by great leaders of the past at times of national and global strife: "*The only thing we have to fear, is fear itself*" ~Franklin D. Roosevelt, "*If ever you find yourself going through hell, keep going*" ~Winston Churchill, and "*Feed your faith and your fears will starve to death*" ~Unknown.

I know some of you who work in the healthcare profession or who have family and friends who work in the healthcare profession are especially concerned for your loved one's well-being. Please know of my profound appreciation and respect for what they are doing at this time to heal the sick and prevent the further spread of this virus all at the potential cost of their own health and well-being. "*No greater love hath any man than to lay down their own life for their friends.* (John 15: 13)" Know of my prayers and I ask everyone in our parish to pray for healing for those sick with the Coronavirus (COVID-19), for the success of our healthcare professionals in curtailing the spread of this virus, for the safety of our healthcare professionals, and for the families already effected by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) that they may know the consolation of the Holy Spirit.

Below, please find some updated decisions concerning our parish religious education program, ministries and apostolates, Masses, and some pastoral suggestions for us all at this time.

Religious Education (First through Sixth Grades)

Due to the legitimate concerns of our parents, who merely love their children and want to protect their families, all Religious Education and related events or activities are suspended forthwith.

At a time where the Coronavirus is no longer a serious concern, catechists can return their textbooks, etc. Furthermore, I know catechists who have planned to give their students a gift, this can be done once there is no longer a concern.

To be absolutely clear, there will be no religious education on Saturday/Sunday, March 21/22, 2020.

The second grade First Eucharist retreat is still on schedule to happen, as it is our hope that by April 5, 2020, we will be passed this epidemic. If we have not overcome this epidemic by that time, we will cancel. But, at this time this event is still scheduled to happen.

First Penance and First Holy Communion, both scheduled in the beginning of May are certainly still on and will only be postponed if by that time our situation has not changed.

Confirmation

Yesterday, March 15, 2020, the Vocationist Fathers at the Sanctuary of Mary, hosted a phenomenal retreat for our Confirmandi. I want to take this time to thank them for their hard work and the work of all of our catechists and our Coordinator for Religious Education, Ms. Claudette Casile. The Confirmandi had a great time and it was a very positive experience for them.

Due to the legitimate concern of some parents, about 15 of our Confirmandi refrained from the retreat. In the hope that by April we will be passed legitimate concerns regarding the Coronavirus, and with our friends at St. Thomas/St. James, who likewise had parents refrain from sending their children to the retreat, our parishes are proposing a make-up retreat at Our Lady Queen of Peace in Branchville, NJ on Saturday, April 11, 2020 from 10:30 am – 2:00 pm. Again, if by April 11, 2020, we are not passed legitimate concern regarding the Coronavirus, we will further suspend this make-up retreat. All Confirmandi are required to attend a Confirmation retreat before being Confirmed. While a Confirmand's non-attendance at this past weekend's retreat is certainly excused, it will need to be made-up.

Currently, our Confirmation Masses with Bishop Serratelli are scheduled for the evening of Thursday, April 16, 2020. I have sent an email to the priest-secretary for the bishop concerning this date. I have requested that I be given until April 1, 2020 to prudently decide, based on the situation at that time, whether or not the Confirmation Masses should be held on April 16. If by April 1 the situation has not yet improved, then I will cancel the Confirmation Masses and request the faculty to Confirm, as their pastor, our Confirmandi at a Mass to-be-determined at a later date. A decision will need to be made by April 1, because we would need to provide the opportunity for the make-up Confirmation retreat and our "conversation" with the Confirmandi before April 16.

Currently, if we go ahead with the Confirmation on April 16, only the Confirmandi, Sponsors and their parents are being permitted to attend Confirmations at this time by order of the bishop. No one else may attend.

Lastly, in accord with the decision concerning religious education, our “conversation” with all the Confirmandi scheduled for Saturday, March 21, 2020 is suspended until a later date to-be-determined in relationship with the date for our Confirmation Masses, either April 16, 2020 or another later date. Please, use this time to study the “Confirmation Study Guide” and you can do this with your family. The prayers in the back may also be comforting at this time.

Other Parish Events/Activities

In general, whenever we are faced with a time of crisis, we should always turn to prayer. Of course, this can be done at home, which will be addressed later. Yet, there is something powerful in praying as a community. The Church, by her nature, is a community. And, for those who are well and do not present a risk to either spreading or contracting the Coronavirus (COVID-19), I want to continue to offer them the faith, hope and love that come from worshipping God as a community.

It goes without saying, that any and all of these events/activities are totally optional and voluntary and thus there is no obligation to go to or participate in anything with which you don't feel comfortable. And, I totally appreciate and respect such sentiments.

Eucharistic Adoration/XLT: As you know, every Monday night there is Eucharistic Adoration and the Sacrament of Penance, yet the time will change to **7:00 to 7:45 pm**, in order to abide by the curfew. This will continue. However, following all the guidelines of common sense and proper hygiene. I also encourage people to sit apart from each other.

This Thursday, March 19, 2020 at 7 pm until 7:45 pm – Solemnity of St. Joseph – we will have our first XLT. I want to offer this incredibly powerful time of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, with the Sacraments of Penance and the Anointing of the Sick as an opportunity for refreshment, a break from all the agitation of what is going on. This may prove a “spirit-lifting” event for anyone dealing with the doldrums of this crisis. Again, we should keep a healthy space between each other and anyone who is sick, etc. . .stay home!

Stations of the Cross: Will still occur on Friday's at 7 pm. Again, this may prove a helpful moment of prayer uniting one's self with the Cross of Christ at a time that we most certainly are experiencing the Cross.

40 Days for Life Rosary: Will still occur on Monday mornings outside of Planned Parenthood in Newton. Considering that this occurs outdoors, in the fresh air, I cannot see this being an environment of high risk.

Lenten Pilgrimage to Czestochowa: This is the lone event that is **canceled**. I do not find it prudent for 40 some people to be enclosed on a bus, at this time, for a two-hour trip in each direction.

Bible Study: Marisa Tipton will be contacting you, but this will be held online and not in person.

Christian Civilization Class: Suspended until further notice. We will re-convene when the situation is appropriate.

Navigating Your Marriage: Suspended until further notice, tonight's event will not occur.

Food Pantry: Will continue for the foreseeable future on Mondays from 12 until 2 pm or until further notice.

Masses, other Sacraments and the Church Building

The church building will remain open for people to come and pray during the same hours this usually would occur. Each morning the church is aired-out and all the chairs will be wiped-down with either Lysol or Clorox disinfecting wipes. On Thursdays, the church receives its proper cleaning. In the case that someone in our parish does contract the Coronavirus (COVID-19), the church building will be immediately closed, and the Diocese of Paterson has contracted with a proper specialized cleaning team to properly sanitize the church building.

The Varricchio Hall will be closed outside of Sunday Masses, XLT and the Stations of the Cross. This means there will be no access to the public bathroom in Varricchio Hall at any other time.

Daily masses will continue as scheduled at 8 am.

Sunday Masses: We will continue to have the 5 pm Vigil Mass, the 8 am and 11 am Sunday Masses. **The 9:30 am Sunday Mass is suspended until further notice!** This is so that there is enough time after each Sunday Mass to air-out the church and to wipe-down the chairs with disinfecting wipes before the next Mass.

There is also no "Sign of Peace" until further notice. And, the precious blood will only be received by the priest, no common chalice until further notice.

We encourage everyone who is well enough to attend, to do so. Those who are not well or have pre-existing medical conditions should, indeed must, make use of the dispensation from the Sunday obligation until it is safe for them to return to Sunday Mass.

Reception of the Holy Eucharist: The bishop has asked that people receive Holy Communion in their hands. In accord with the liturgical law of the Church there are four ways of receiving Holy Communion in the Ordinary Form of the Roman Mass: 1) Standing and in your hand, 2) Standing and on your tongue, 3) Kneeling and in your hand, or 4) Kneeling and on your tongue. Each of these postures for the reception of Holy Communion have an ancient and venerable tradition. And, each of these postures are your legitimate right. Though, the bishop's request is certainly prudent, and I ask that you honor it for this period of time.

However, in order to preserve your rights, but also safeguard from the spread of germs, I ask that those who wish to receive Holy Communion on the tongue please wait until everyone who wishes to receive in the hand goes first. Then, those who wish to receive on the tongue can proceed to Holy Communion. This will also alleviate the concern of the concerned that they are

not receiving Holy Communion after any incidental touch of one's tongue. You will also note that hand sanitizer will be used by myself before and after Holy Communion.

Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion: Your ministry is suspended at all Masses, daily or Sunday, until further notice. If you currently bring Holy Communion to the Sick, please follow all guidelines of those healthcare institutions where you help. Most have already banned the entrance of outside visitors.

Priestly Ministry to the Sick/Dying: The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick/Last Viaticum will still be administered by me. In cases of imminent death or dangerous illness, please continue to contact me via the emergency line.

The Parish Office

The parish office will remain open, that is our staff will continue to come-in, as needed, and until further notice to do their work. However, I request that people not visit the parish office unless absolutely necessary and only after having called in advance and requested an appointment. Thus, consider the office closed until further notice. I am currently working with the staff to coordinate their being able to work from home.

Lent

I would like now to take the rest of this letter to address you all spiritually.

A Test of Faith. Every Lent, not just this year, is a test of faith. Each of us is tested by God during the Season of Lent to grow in faith. This is why we fast, do penance and smudge ashes on our heads because if we really believe in Jesus, then we know that the sacrifice of food and the penances that we embrace are done for a greater glory. The struggles we face during the Coronavirus have imposed a certain test of faith and required acts of sacrifice. Embrace this test of faith and the sacrifices that go with it and incorporate them into your lent, and I am confident you will receive spiritual consolations.

Alms and charity. I ask that you please consider your neighbor. At this time, especially if one's neighbor is sick or elderly, they may not be able to get out and shop for food and supplies or pick-up their prescriptions. Please look-in on your neighbor and, if you are well, see if they need any help. A living faith is a faith put into action.

Facing our Mortality. The Coronavirus has caused us all to become ever more aware of the fragility of our life and that death is a reality. We all professed this when we received our ashes and were reminded that *we are dust and unto dust we shall return*. Our faith teaches us that we should not fear death, rather we are to be at peace because heaven awaits those who have endured the test of faith. In fact, what lies ahead is better than what is here. Now, we need not act recklessly, but we should have a clean conscience and living hope that doesn't fear death. And, if we are troubled with the reality of our mortality, then we should confess what burdens us to live in the peace of Christ.

I find it no mere coincidence that we are faced with the threat of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) during Lent as it has awoken to the world the essence of what we, as Christians, are

meant to live each year at this time. Remember: Jesus won the victory of the Cross to free us from sin, death and the devil.

Ways of Praying as a Family at Home

For the many of you who justly are staying home at this time for your safety, I would like to offer you some pastoral suggestions of ways you can pray as a family. I am concerned for you and want you to know of my continued spiritual closeness with you all at this time. And, I yearn deeply seeing your faces back at Mass as soon as possible after this epidemic.

Parents, one of the reasons I keep encouraging people to stay calm is because I don't want our children to become frightened. I am sure you share this sentiment. Praying as a family can certainly bless your family with peace, confidence and calm. So, here are some suggestions.

A Family Rosary: You can find how to pray the Rosary here:
<https://olqpbranchville.org/the-holy-rosary>.

The Stations of the Cross: Absolutely appropriate during Lent. Here's a link:
<https://www.ecatholic2000.com/liguori/stations/cross.shtml>.

Chaplet of Divine Mercy: <https://www.thedivinemercy.org/message/devotions/pray-the-chaplet>.

If you cannot make Sunday Mass, please still keep the Lord's Day holy through prayer as a family.

Finances

I know that giving might be difficult at this time, but our bills do not go away just because we cannot collect our usual Sunday Offering. I ask you to please continue to send in your offering via mail in an envelope or to make use of our online giving option: <https://giving.parishsoft.com/app/giving/our209221> . I cannot thank you enough! Your blessings given our parish are helping us grow and serve the many and varied needs of our community!

Valediction

Lastly, know of my spiritual closeness to you all at this time. I wish you all peace and the knowledge of the love of God that will keep your faith and hope enkindled during this time of difficulty. And, May the blessing of almighty God keep you and your families safe at this time.

Yours in Christ,



Fr. Philip-Michael F. Tangorra
Pastor, Our Lady Queen of Peace
Branchville, New Jersey

