

Diocese of Austin

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Office of the Bishop

March 17, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Out of pastoral concern for the people of central Texas, I am suspending all public Masses and liturgies throughout the diocese, effective immediately. While I hoped we would be able to continue to celebrate public Mass, I made this decision after prayerful discernment and in light of recent recommendations from public health officials.

I have instructed our priests to offer daily and Sunday Masses privately in the parish sanctuaries. So that you stay connected to your parish community, many of these private Masses, especially the Sunday Mass, will be made available on parish social media. Additionally, I ask that all parishes continue to maintain day-to-day operations, with reduced staff if necessary. To the best of my ability, I intend to maintain day-to-day operations at the Pastoral Center and Catholic Charities of Central Texas to accompany all in need.

With this decision, I offer the following directives:

- All parishes will celebrate a private daily Mass in the main sanctuary for the spiritual well-being of the community. A private Mass is not open to the public and may be attended by a small number of liturgical ministers. If a parish has a mission church, I ask that a private Mass be celebrated in that sanctuary at least weekly.
- Parishes are encouraged to develop various ways of building spiritual community through social media and small Christian groups.
- All Confirmation Masses will be rescheduled at a later time.
- Funerals and weddings will be celebrated privately with only close family and friends in attendance, following the limitations in any county or city order.
- Parish churches will remain open during normal hours for private prayer and devotionals.
- All communal penance services in parishes are cancelled. However, priests will continue to offer the Sacrament of Penance according to the parish's regularly scheduled reconciliation times, observing public health advisories regarding social distancing.

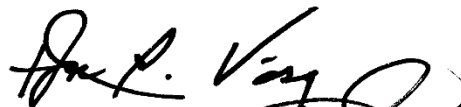
- Priests should remain available for the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, observing public health advisories regarding social distancing.
- Because public Masses are being suspended, homebound ministry with holy Communion is also suspended. Clergy should use prudential judgment in bringing holy Communion to those who are gravely ill.
- No private Masses should be celebrated in homes.
- Parish offices should keep normal business hours with essential staff, observing public health advisories regarding social distancing.
- Parish ministries may continue, observing public health advisories regarding social distancing. Pastors are asked to make prudential judgment in these matters.
- Religious Education programs should follow the local school district closures.
- Catholic schools should follow the directives of the Superintendent of Catholic Schools.
- Parishes with perpetual adoration are encouraged to observe public health advisories, while ensuring that there are no times when the Eucharist is left alone.

As I share in the hopes, griefs, and anxieties of the Christian faithful during this uncertain time, I ask that we continue to pray for the strength to persevere by God's grace, remembering to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord.

Let us pray together:

O God, our refuge in trials, our strength in sickness, our comfort in sorrow, spare your people, we pray, that through this affliction, they may find relief at last through your loving mercy. We ask this through the intercession of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, patroness of this diocese, and Saint Joseph, patron of the universal Church. Amen.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe S. Vasquez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

Most Reverend Joe S. Vasquez
Bishop of Austin