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March 18, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Greetings in the Lord. I write to inform you of important decisions I am making in light of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. As Christians, we place all our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, knowing that our God is always with us and will always watch over us. As citizens of the state, we must do what we can to abide by the rules set up by legitimate authorities in order to promote (and protect) the common good. After a great deal of prayer and discernment, and in communion with all of the bishops of Florida, I am making the following pronouncements:

- **All public Sunday and weekday Masses are suspended in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee**, beginning at noon on Friday, March 20, 2020, until further notice. While I pray that we will be able to reverse this course as soon as possible, I would rather not put a limit on it right now, only to have to update it in a few days.
- All Catholics in the Diocese are hereby dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass while this suspension remains in effect.
- All other regularly scheduled liturgies and gatherings in our churches will be canceled as well. Hence there will be no Reconciliation services or Stations of the Cross at this time. If a parishioner requests Confession, a priest will do what he can to fulfill that request.
- It is my hope that our churches be open for private prayer and devotion at this time. Each pastor will decide if that is possible, as well as what may be offered when the church is opened (i.e., Adoration, recorded prayers or homilies, or simply quiet time with the Lord in front of the Blessed Sacrament). However, no communal services may be scheduled.
- I am asking all of our priests to celebrate daily Mass (without a congregation) for the intentions of the faithful, even though they are not physically present. I will be doing the same at the Pastoral Center or in the chapel in my house.

There are many options for participating in a Mass through TV or the Internet. Please see our webpage for links and times (www.ptdiocese.org). It is not possible to receive Holy Communion in this format, of course, and I am deeply saddened by this. At the same time, it gives us an opportunity to receive "Spiritual Communion," which as Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote, is "an ardent desire to receive Jesus in the Holy Sacrament and a loving embrace as though we had already received Him."

You can use the following prayer from St. Alphonsus Liguori to make a "spiritual communion":

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love you above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least into my heart. I embrace You as if you were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

Not being able to attend Mass is a great sacrifice for us. We all hunger and thirst for the Real Presence in the Eucharist, and it is very difficult to have to forego that even for a little while. Let us unite our sense of longing with those who rarely or never have the opportunity to receive the Eucharist due to religious persecution, sickness, or the lack of priests.

I strongly encourage you to continue to “keep holy the Sabbath,” by reflecting on the Word of God (especially the readings for the day), reciting the rosary or the Divine Mercy Chaplet together, praying the Stations of the Cross, or in another manner.

We are all one in the Body of Christ. Let us pray for each other during this time of crisis and uncertainty. Please join me in praying for our brothers and sisters who are isolated or who are sick. We pray as well for the brave medical personnel and first responders, and all who are caring for the sick and quarantined. And let us not forget those who are lonely, afraid, depressed or anxious at this time.

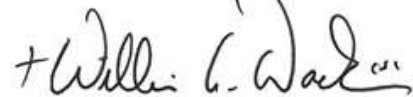
I know that there will be questions regarding the sacraments (Baptism, Marriage, Confirmation, Anointing of the Sick) and funerals, and I know that our priests will be able to minister to everyone in due time. They have always been there for us in the past, and they will certainly be with us in our need now.

Please pray for your priests. In addition to feeling the anxieties and concerns that we all have, they are dedicated to the spiritual care of all of us – even if that means putting themselves in harm’s way. This is a new situation for them just as it is for me, so please be patient with us and help us to come together as people of faith.

Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida will continue to provide services to those in need in our community. For updated information on seeking help, please visit www.ccnwfl.org.

You remain in my daily prayers. Thank you for your prayers for me.

In Christ’s Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William A. Wack" with a small "CSC" to the right.

Most Reverend William A. Wack, CSC
Bishop of Pensacola-Tallahassee