

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I write to you again to speak about the many challenges we all face in light of the growing Coronavirus pandemic, which is so significantly impacting every facet of our daily lives. As you already know, the bishops of Ohio earlier this week decided to suspend the public celebration of Mass in every diocese of the state, and dispensed to the faithful from their obligation to attend Mass at least through Easter Sunday.

I cannot begin to tell you how difficult and painful this decision was, especially during the Lenten season. But, after consultation with our Governor and several health and medical officials, and faced with the stark realities regarding the spread of this virus, it became apparent that this dramatic step was critical to making sure we are doing all we can to help curtail the spread of this virus and keep our communities healthy. This extreme measure is a stark reminder of the necessity for all of us to heed the warnings of health and government officials to stay at home.

As Masses have been halted until after Easter, all other activities and events in our parishes must also be canceled or postponed to restrict contact and exposure. Many have asked about keeping our churches open for prayer, Adoration, and Reconciliation. The real answer is that you should remain home. Please understand that we as priests want to be faithful to our responsibility for the care of souls but in doing so, not to place people in danger. For the moment that means finding other ways to keep our parishioners connected and spiritually fed through the Word of God, and responding to pastoral emergencies. I implore your understanding and our shared cooperation. Trust me, I look forward to being together to celebrate the sacred mysteries of our faith. It is only under the strictest guidelines for hygiene and safety that Churches may be open for prayer and confession. Priests will try to be available or get the necessary assistance for urgent situations.

I want to leave you with this suggestion: if possible, in consideration of not only your health but the health of all those you might come in contact with, **please make every effort to stay home** and find other means to stay close to the Lord. This is especially true for those of us with the highest risk for complications from infection. Utilize Catholic media, TV, and St. Gabriel Radio to continue to experience the Mass. Take this opportunity to expand your prayer life. You can find links to much of this information on our website, columbuscatholic.org. As we move forward, we will continue adding resources to assist you.

Even in these challenging times, as we all continue our faith journey during Lent, all of us can engage in spiritual communion. A spiritual communion acknowledges that deep sense of loss at not being able to share the sacrament but an act of faith in Jesus' faithful presence among us as we long for the day when we might share anew in the Lord's most gracious gift.

Let us be united with ever-fervent prayer even as we experience physical "social distancing". Let us beg God's help and mercy in this trying time. Indeed let us practice "extreme charity" making these sacrifices for the good of those around us and being aware of the each other's needs. We pray for all those who are afflicted by this virus or any illness, for all of us who have been impacted, and for those who labor to curb and defeat its effects and keep us safe. We offer all of our sufferings and anxiety to Our Lord Jesus, and united in faith, we pray to be refreshed by his boundless love.

Sincerely in Christ,
Most Reverend Robert J. Brennan
Bishop of Columbus