

A message from Bishop O'Connell on measures to mitigate spread of COVID-19

March 16, 2020

God has not abandoned us and is present among us. As we learn each day of the growing concern surrounding the spread of the coronavirus in our communities, we need to have faith and confidence in God, especially in times like these, praying that He will see us through the present adversity safely.

Mindful of the Lord Jesus' own words in St. Luke's Gospel, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself, take up his Cross daily, and follow me (Luke 9: 23)," the coronavirus pandemic has placed such a Cross before us.

In response to the latest guidelines from national and state health authorities aimed at stopping the spread of the disease, I have directed the following:

MASSES, SACRAMENTS AND OTHER CHURCH SERVICES

- All public Masses throughout the Diocese of Trenton will be temporarily suspended through April 3, 2020. That date is subject to change as the coronavirus pandemic evolves.
- Baptisms, funerals and weddings may continue based on the judgement of pastors, with the caution that crowds should not exceed 50 persons as mandated by the State of New Jersey.
- Social distancing practices (3-6 feet of space between participants) should be observed for any event inside church spaces.
- Churches should remain open for prayer, private devotion and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Pastors are asked to consider Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament during the day. Praying in large groups, however, should be avoided.
- Attention should be paid to the cleanliness of our church facilities.
- Televised or online celebrations of the Mass and other religious programming are available for use of the faithful during this time.
- All scheduled Confirmations in the Diocese will be temporarily postponed until after Easter and will be re-scheduled after that time.
- The Sacrament of Penance should remain available according to need, but public Penance Services are not to be conducted.

- The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick should also remain available for true emergencies. Hospitals and nursing homes may be on lock-down and priests are advised to check on their status beforehand.

SCHOOLS, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND OTHER CLOSURES

- All Catholic schools in the Diocese will remain closed as mandated by the State of New Jersey. Directions for academic work have been provided by the Superintendent of Catholic Schools in coordination with Catholic school administrations.
- All religious education programs are suspended with at-home work provided by the local parish leaders where possible.
- The Chancery offices will be closed March 16 through March 23 and staff will work remotely during that time. A limited number of staff will be present in the office on an as-needed basis to provide essential services.
- Pastors should make appropriate judgments regarding parish offices. Other regular parish activities and previously scheduled events should be postponed or canceled.
- Catholic social and charitable outreach programs and services in the Diocese should be adjusted to meet directions mandated by the State of New Jersey.

The Catholic faithful of the Diocese — priests, religious and lay faithful — are advised to keep informed and updated regarding the progress of the coronavirus pandemic during this national and state emergency. You will find links to national, state and local agencies on our webpage: dioceseoftrenton.org/coronavirus.

We will continue to evaluate new information that could impact these directives and will post regular updates to dioceseoftrenton.org/coronavirus; TrentonMonitor.com/coronavirus and on the Diocese's social media pages.

FINALLY, avoid crowded areas, observe careful hygiene, keep appropriate distances outside the home and if feeling sick, stay at home. I ask that all of the faithful remember the elderly and other persons at risk in their families and communities, and reach out to them by phone to see if help is needed.

A CALL TO PRAYER

An Act of Spiritual Communion is proposed for the faithful who are temporarily unable to receive the Eucharist:

“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 spiritually 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.”

For a list of streamed or recorded Masses available online, or television stations airing the Sunday Mass, go to dioceseoftrenton.org/coronavirus.

As we all face what has become a grave and growing health risk, it is important for all the Catholic faithful to “persevere in hardship and keep praying regularly (Romans 12:12).” As Bishop of the Diocese of Trenton, I invite all the Catholic faithful to join with me in prayer:

O Mary, loving Mother, you always shine on our path as a sign of salvation and of hope. We entrust ourselves to you, who at the Cross took part in Jesus’ pain, keeping your faith firm.

You, Salvation of Your People, know what we need, and we are sure you will provide so that, as in Cana of Galilee, we may return to joy and to feasting after this time of trial.

Help us, Mother of Divine Love, to conform to the will of the Father and to do as we are told by Jesus, who has taken upon himself our sufferings and carried our sorrows to lead us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection.

Be present to all those suffering from coronavirus and to those who care for them: families, friends, neighbors, doctors, nurses, staff, government officials, pastors, priests and all who seek to do God’s will. Bring comfort and calm to the elderly, to those at risk and to all who are afraid. Be for us all a beacon of hope, lighting our path once more to the heart of your beloved Son, the Divine Healer and Health of the Sick.

Under your protection, we seek refuge, Holy Mother of God. Deliver us from every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin.

Amen.