



DIocese of Alexandria

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote in his *Confessions*, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” This great insight perfectly describes our human nature. We are constantly seeking something better, and we often try to satisfy that hunger with the things of this world that will never satisfy us for more than a minute or an hour or a day. Our hunger will return, our heart will remain restless. Only God can satisfy our deepest longings, our deepest desires, our deepest needs.

As Catholics, we often express our participation in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist as an obligation – unless the obligation is dispensed, we are “obliged” or “obligated” to attend Mass. We could express the same concept in terms of opportunity. Each Sunday – often, each day – we have the opportunity to participate in Mass, to be nourished by the Word of God and the Bread of Life. Yet perhaps Saint Augustine’s insight brings us closer to the truth. As humans, we not only have the opportunity or the obligation to participate in Mass – we have a basic human need to offer God our worship and our praise, and also to draw from the celebration of the Eucharist the graces that we need to continue to live as disciples of the Lord. We know that if we do not drink water daily, our health will be compromised, our life may be lost. Still, we do not usually say, “I am obliged to drink water.” Rather, we say, “I must drink water in order to live.” So it is with the Eucharist. We must offer God our worship or our hearts will return to their restless and empty state.

Because of the health crisis throughout the world, we have not had a moral obligation to participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass for about a year and a half. Our hearts were still restless, our souls still needed the nourishment, but we were dispensed from the obligation of Mass attendance to protect ourselves from the current virus. A few weeks ago, I announced that the general dispensation from the obligation of Mass attendance would end in the Diocese of Alexandria on August 15, 2021. We have been inviting all to “Come to the Table,” to be nourished again with the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

In making this decision, I am aware that the vast majority of us have gone back to our “normal lives.” We are traveling, shopping, dining out, participating in social and recreational gatherings. If we are able to do that, then our Sunday celebration of Mass should return to being a regular and necessary part of our lives. We need to reconnect with God and with the Church even more than we need to go to a party or eat in a restaurant. At the same time, I know that there are those who are not yet ready to return to worship in public – whose health is too fragile or for whom just leaving their home would place them or their loved ones at too much risk.

Over the past few weeks, as a result of both a new variant and our low vaccination rate, Louisiana has experienced a surge both in the number of those diagnosed with virus and, unfortunately, in hospitalizations. In spite of this surge, I have chosen not to continue the “blanket dispensation” past August 14. We need to return to the Mass too much to continue to stay away. Rather, I want to set out some of the conditions that would reasonably require some of our brothers and sisters to delay their return for a while longer. If any of the

following apply to you, you would not need a blanket dispensation – you would have a personal dispensation that applies to you for as long as the condition exists:

1. You are sick with any communicable disease or from any other condition that would make your travel to, or participation at Mass too difficult.
2. You wish to receive a COVID vaccine, but have been unable to receive one, or you have received only one of the two required inoculations, or your immunity has not yet kicked in (approximately two weeks after the second dose of the vaccine).
3. You have other health conditions that would make exposure to the virus too dangerous for you.
4. You care for someone who cannot obtain a vaccine, or who has health conditions that would make exposure to the virus too dangerous.
5. You have a true fear of the virus and are isolating or quarantining until the surge is over or until the virus is eradicated.

All of these conditions, and perhaps others, are valid reasons to continue to stay home. If you are concerned about this, then I invite you to contact your pastor and discuss your particular situation. Additionally, if you have a reasonable fear of gathering in large groups during this present surge, I invite you to look for a daily Mass in your parish or one nearby. The congregation is almost always smaller and it is usually possible to remain socially distant. It is important to receive the Eucharist, even if participation in the Sunday celebration is too difficult or dangerous at present.

For those who may not have an identifiable condition, but who are nonetheless concerned about returning, you are welcome to attend wearing a face mask. Indeed, during this present surge, masks are recommended for all – those vaccinated and especially for those unvaccinated. I have encouraged our parishes and missions to designate at least some portion of their seating as an area where social distancing is required. If you are interested in this socially distanced seating area, contact your parish church to determine if they will offer such an area and where it will be located. All of our churches should continue to have hand sanitizer available, and will continue with regular cleaning and sanitizing the church and other gathering areas.

When you return, please respect the sensibilities of others. Many will wear masks, others will not. Many will want to avoid physical contact when greeting others and during the sign of peace. The Eucharist should bring us together as the Body of Christ, not be a source of division.

We are inviting all back to Mass, but we recognize that not everyone will be able to return or will feel comfortable returning at this time. The end to the dispensation is not a declaration of victory over the virus or a denial that it exists and is dangerous. Indeed, this recent surge reminds us of our need to be careful. Yet our invitation to return to the Eucharist at this time is a recognition that we need to be fed by the Body of Christ even with some safety precautions.

Please join me in prayer for the health and safety of all of those in our community and throughout the world.

Live Jesus in our hearts!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Robert W. Marshall, Jr.", written in a cursive style.

Most Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr.
Bishop of Alexandria