

Special Memo - COVID-19

Date: March 27, 2020
From: Bishop Michael Warfel
To: Clergy, Religious, Lay Ecclesial Ministers, et al

DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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In collaboration with Bishop Vetter of the Diocese of Helena and with the priests of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, I am enacting the following regulations for the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings, which become effective March 28, 2020 and continue in effect until further notice. Diocesan staff and I will continue to monitor the situation regarding the spread of the Coronavirus and issue updates and modifications as necessary. Please note that this Update both replaces as well as contains information from previous updates.

The Governor has enacted a shelter-in-place order effective March 28, 2020. Parish offices and the Chancery will be closed as of March 28, 2020. If there is an issue with elements such as mail and package delivery, please contact either the post office or other provider to arrange for pick up at their facility.

Beginning March 28, 2020, sacraments are to be celebrated following appropriate safety protocols and procedures according to the shelter-in-place order. Once the shelter-in-place order is lifted, I will issue further directives based on the situation at the time.

Parish churches will remain open for private prayer so long as no more than 10 people assemble in the church and social/physical distancing (a minimum of 6 feet) is maintained.

From Matt Brower, Director of the Montana Catholic Conference who communicated with the Governor's Office: "...under the directive the parishes and chancery are being treated as "essential businesses." We ought not have public masses but there is very likely great latitude to continue celebrating baptisms, confessions, anointing of the sick, and funerals. Whether this is prudent or not is a different matter. It was emphasized to me that we are just being asked to exercise common sense. Those who can work from home ought to do so. Parish offices can remain open for things like pastoral counseling visits, etc. Visits to the sick and homebound, communion for the sick and homebound, viaticum, etc. are still permitted. Online Masses may continue from the cathedral/parishes and they understand that doing so requires support staff and that is perfectly acceptable. Governor's staff is looking into specifics regarding funeral celebrations, baptisms, etc. and whether or not under the order churches are permitted to remain open for prayer. What I was told suggested all these things would probably be permissible assuming appropriate social distancing is practiced.

All public Masses are suspended until further notice. The general dispensation for all the faithful from the obligation to participate at Mass on Sunday remains in place until notification to lift the restriction is made.

All priests are encouraged to privately celebrate one Mass each day, praying for their parishioners, and for those who are sick, care givers, first responders, and those who work to mitigate the impact of the Coronavirus. At a Mass celebrated privately, there may be no more than a handful of people assisting.

From Governor Bullock's attorney: On the virtual worship question, nothing in the order should be read to prevent a church leader from returning to conduct remote worship services provided there isn't congregating in

the church itself and that the leader conducting the service observes social distancing protocols. Please feel free to share this message with others to get the word out. We will as well.

Ralph [Graybill, Governor Bullock's attorney]

Priests are not dispensed from the obligation to offer Mass for the people on Sunday. Priests are expected to remain at their parish assignments and be available in order to serve parishioners, e.g., confessions, anointing of the sick.

Every household is asked to celebrate Sunday as a household church by having a family prayer service based on the Sunday Scriptures and shared reflection of the readings and making a spiritual communion. Other possibilities include praying the Rosary, Lectio Divina, etc. The Liturgy of the Hours is available free via librarian@ebreviary.com which is the eBreviary version and may be download for individual or communal use.

As bishop, I will celebrate a Mass privately that will be recorded or live streamed on Facebook beginning the 5th Sunday of Lent. A number of parishes are also offering live stream of Masses. There are also many such offerings available online.

Eucharistic Exposition is not allowed because it is a "public action." If parishioners come into the church (no more than 10) they may simply adore the Lord before the Blessed Sacrament in a Tabernacle which is not per se public. (The great model of St. Francisco Marto's of Fatima of spending time before the "Hidden Jesus" in the Tabernacle is a profound opportunity to enrich the ***Spiritual Communion*** of the faithful, especially as he suffered death from the Spanish influenza, April 4, 1919). This may help to keep sufficient social/physical spacing while adhering to the 10 people limit and not having to close a church.

For the period during which the public celebration of Mass is suspended, Word and Communion Services are not permitted.

Communion to the Home bound and Nursing Homes should be suspended due to the health risks to some of our most vulnerable parishioners (Nursing Homes have their own protocols). Parishes should establish regular contact, by phone, facetime or other electronic communication, to those who are home bound in order to help them stay prayerfully connected to their parish.

Anointing of the Sick and Dying is a special concern. Priests are asked to be courageous and generously respond to those who are in proximate danger of death and request anointing and viaticum. The directions, procedures and policies of all medical and care facilities must be strictly followed when visiting the ill. According to canonical advice, vinyl

gloves may be worn during an anointing but should be retained and burned respectfully at a later time. Also, only a small amount of the oil need be poured onto the finger given

concern of contamination of the oil in its container. If a priest anoints a person who has COVID-19, he will need to self-quarantine and follow other guidance from the State or County Health Department.

Palm Sunday, Holy Week, the Sacred Triduum:

Bishop Warfel will celebrate privately the Liturgies of Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Easter. These will be live streamed on the diocesan Facebook site: Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020 at 11 am; Holy Thursday, April 9, 2020 at 5 pm; Good Friday, April 10, 2020 at 3 pm; Easter Vigil, April 11, 2020 at 5 pm (as an exception); and Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020 at 11 am. Pastors are asked to follow a similar schedule and if possible, live stream services. Times when these liturgies are celebrated are to be determined at the discretion of the pastor.

NB: these directives from the Holy See are for 2020 only.

All previous liturgical directives remain in place. **There are to be no *public* celebrations of the Liturgies of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter.**

Palm (Passion) Sunday - Pastors should celebrate Palm Sunday privately. Blessed palms (not required) should be retained for distribution later. If kept in closed plastic bags they are subject to molding. One distributor suggests refrigeration for a month while making sure they have some circulation by putting some holes in the bag.

Holy Thursday - Pastors/Administrators are urged, but are not required, to privately celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper in the parish church (only one celebration even if you are pastor of more than one parish), without washing feet, omitting any concluding procession and keeping the Blessed Sacrament in the Tabernacle (in light of a Decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments). The Holy Father has granted to all priests the Faculty to celebrate Mass "without people" on Holy Thursday 2020 and if unable to celebrate Mass, pray Vespers of the Day. (This does not preclude the 10-person limit for assisting at a private Mass).

Good Friday - Pastors may, but are not required, to privately celebrate the Liturgy of the Lord's Passion in the parish church; venerate the Cross with a profound bow (rather than kissing the Cross).

Easter Vigil - Pastors may, but are not required, to privately celebrate the Easter Vigil (following the rubrics when there are no sacraments of initiation) and, in light of the Decree of the Congregation, the lighting of the fire is omitted, the Paschal Candle is lit, there is no procession, the *Exultet* is proclaimed, the Liturgy of the Word (with a suggestion to

use only 3 Old Testament readings), the renewal of baptismal promises, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist are celebrated. Priests who do not celebrate the Vigil are to celebrate the Office of Readings.

Easter Sunday - Priests should celebrate Easter Liturgy privately, praying in a special way for the people of their parish, especially any who are ill and those who have been exposed to the Coronavirus.

The Elect and Candidates for Full Communion - The celebration of the sacraments of initiation will not be celebrated at the Easter Vigil. Baptisms and Reception into Full Communion will be postponed to a later date once the suspension of public Mass is lifted. It is hoped that these may be celebrated on Pentecost Sunday. In danger of death, baptism must take place with confirmation and viaticum.

Keeping in Contact with your parishioners:

Websites - Ensure that the parish websites provide up-to-date information. Utilize the parish website and virtual means for communication with parishioners. For example: announce live streams; publicize on-line catechetical resources, prayer activities; etc. Present stewardship information and encourage on-line parish and diocesan giving. Parishes with the capability should live stream the private parish Mass offered on Sunday.

Please use the wording that public celebration of Mass is *suspended*, not canceled. The sacraments are not canceled, nor are their graces, the public celebration is only suspended.

Please make sure outgoing phone messages are updated and accurate and that phone messaging mailboxes are emptied regularly.

Bulletins - consider keeping some type of regular contact with your parishioners, e.g., a bulletin or regular communication sent electronically or posted on your website in addition to a hard copy at the parish. Consider sending information out by email. Personal phone calls are especially good.

Sacraments:

Baptism - Adult baptisms may be celebrated after Easter once restrictions are lifted. Before then, if necessary, infant baptisms may be celebrated respecting the limitations of the shelter-in-place order while ensuring proper social/physical distancing. Only immediate family may be present.

Confirmation and First Communion - All previously scheduled confirmation and first communion celebrations with Bishop Warfel and/or Fr. Peterson for 2020 are cancelled. Bishop Warfel grants pastors the faculties and delegation to confirm and provide first communion in their respective parishes once the restriction on public Mass is lifted. This faculty is provided solely for 2020.

Weddings - Should be postponed until after the shelter-in-place order is lifted.

Reconciliation - Communal celebrations of the Sacrament of Reconciliation are suspended. Priests are allowed and encouraged to provide opportunities for the private celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. Confessions should continue to be made available under conditions that are deemed appropriate by the pastor of the parish while providing for social/physical distancing. No more than 10 people at a time should be allowed in the Church. Because gatherings are limited to less than 10, General Absolution does not necessarily apply.

Anointing of the Sick: As previously described earlier in this memo.

Funerals - Funerals may be postponed. If held, there should be no vigil or luncheon. Any services are limited to immediate family.

The Diocesan **Chrism Mass** is postponed to a later date. Oils from the previous year will need to be utilized until the Chrism Mass is celebrated (hopefully in May during the scheduled priest's retreat) with new oils being blessed and sacred Chrism consecrated.

Stipends. Diocesan policy on Mass stipends remains. Except for a stipend that was accepted with a stipulation which the donor is unwilling to change, one intention may be assigned to each privately celebrated Mass. During this time, each priest is expected to offer at least one Mass per week for the intentions of the people of the parish (or the people of the Diocese, if not assigned to a particular parish).

Events:

The diocesan priest's retreat scheduled for May 11, 2020 through 14, 2020 is yet scheduled to take place.

Decisions regarding other activities, especially those that have been cancelled or postponed, will be made toward the end of April in consultation with the Priests' Council (or when other restrictions have been lifted).

Watch for additional memos from myself or from the diocesan Human Resource Office, diocesan CFO and/or the Chancellor regarding new and updated information.

We are in this together. I appreciate your support and collaboration. Know that you are in my daily prayers. Keep me in yours.

I and my staff will continue to communicate more information as it becomes available. Please continue to monitor the diocesan web site (diocesegfb.org) for updates and helpful resources.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael W. Warfel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings