

Shrine of the Sacred Heart Parish

3211 Sacred Heart Way, NW ♦ Washington, DC 20110 ♦ TEL. 202-234-8000

15 March 2020

Dear Parishioners and friends:

NO PUBLIC MASS AT THE SHRINE OF THE SACRED HEART

The Shrine of the Sacred Heart was closed for Sunday public Mass perhaps for the first time in history. Following the recommendations of health experts and the example of Pope Francis and other Bishops throughout the world, Archbishop Gregory temporarily suspended ALL daily and Sunday public Masses. The Archbishop issued a dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass and wrote:

“My number one priority as your Archbishop is to ensure the safety and health of all who attend our Masses, the children in our schools, and those we welcome through our outreach and services. Please know that this decision does not come lightly to close our schools or cancel Masses. We are profoundly saddened that we are not able to celebrate our sacraments as a community for the time being but we know Christ remains with us at all times – specifically in times of worry like this.

I have made available pastoral and spiritual resources as well as TV Mass that I encourage you to use. I also invite you to join us for Mass and prayer via livestream in our social media. May the peace of Christ settle any anxieties and fear we may have. Let us continue to pray for the people whose lives have been impacted by the coronavirus as well as those who continue to care for them.”

The coronavirus and its consequences have arrived more quickly than most of us had planned. Since carriers of the virus may not show signs of being sick until as many as 14 days after being infected, some experts are saying that the best way of preventing the spread of the virus is through **social distancing**. We are being called to seriously follow strict guidelines on the washing of hands and on maintaining a clean living and working environment. Not taking seriously these precautions or delaying a response seems to have contributed to the spread of this virus throughout Europe.

Our Sacred Heart website has a special link to the Archdiocese of Washington and links to other sources that provide reliable and timely information. I am very pleased with the way our lay leaders and ministers have maintained contact with one another and have communicated news and information about programs and cancellations. Until further notice, ALL public daily and Sunday Masses are cancelled, as well as, gatherings and meetings in the Church, including catechesis, the **E**nglish as a **S**econd **L**anguage program, all meetings and programs of the Charismatic Renewal and the home-based formation meetings of the MFCC.

The only parish program operating at this time is the Sacred Heart Dinner Program. The Gavan Center is closed to the public. Juan Somarriba and several volunteers have decided to set up tables in front of the parish rectory to offer the homeless and the needy easy to carry away bags with food, while being careful to avoid forming a crowd. The schedule will remain from Monday to Friday from 5:00pm to 6:00pm. Juan has been working to secure donations.

We will have to wait a few days, perhaps even longer, to develop sound pastoral strategies to continue some parish programs under these new circumstances, especially those related to the RCIA and catechesis. Moving forward, any parish programs that are reopened will need to follow strict guidelines to guarantee that safety and health protocols are maintained. This will hold true for the celebrations of Holy Week, the Easter Vigil (April 11) and Easter Sunday. Perhaps some programs can use modern forms of communication to continue.

We are looking forward to the more than 100 Confirmations and more than 100 First Holy Communions that were planned for May and June of 2020. We will search for ways that will secure these important celebrations so that they will not have to be cancelled, even if this means making significant changes to the way we are accustomed to celebrate them. We simply don't know the particulars at this time. Weddings and Funerals continue to be offered in the Church.

We also do not know the changes that may occur for the priestly ordination of our deacon and brother, Diogo Escudero, ofmcap, scheduled to be held here at the Shrine on Saturday June 13th 2020. We only know that he is ready. We will inform you about the details once we know them.

On June 12th 2021 we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Church Building of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart. The cornerstone at our Church was placed just after the infamous Influenza Pandemic swept through Washington DC from October 1918 until February 1919 with an estimate of 50,000 cases in the city and 3,000 deaths. In 1918 precautions against influenza included avoiding those with coughs and colds, avoiding gatherings and large crowds, especially indoors and suggesting that one spend "as much time as possible in the open [outdoors], especially in the sunshine." On October 7th 1918, the city of St. Louis banned public gatherings of more than 20 people. During this time, it seems that public Catholic Masses were temporarily cancelled in some US cities. About 1/3 of the world's population or about 500 million people were infected. The global death toll reached more than 50 million. Some estimate that about 675,000 died in the United States.

Some experts are predicting that this new coronavirus will be around until the springtime of 2021, just about the time we will be rededicating our beautiful Shrine of the Sacred Heart after 100 years. Stay healthy and save the date: Saturday June 12th 2021.

At this time, it may also be helpful to remember the example of St. Oscar Romero who on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, on March 20th 1977, suspended ALL Sunday Masses in the entire Archdiocese of San Salvador to celebrate ONE Sunday Mass in the Cathedral as a sign of unity and grief for the assassination of Fr. Rutilio Grande Garcia, SJ, Manuel Solórzano and Nelson Lemus. On that day only those at Cathedral Mass received Holy Communion. A few priests celebrated their "own Mass" apart from the archbishop and against his wishes. Some of the wealthy and powerful people of the capital city did not understand the teaching that the Body

of Christ and the Body of the Church are called to be ONE. Our situation today is different, but in some ways similar.

In terms of receiving Holy Communion during this time of emergency, I have heard 3-4 thought-provoking proposals that take into consideration social distancing and other norms related to hygiene and are alternatives to the crowded Sunday Mass. Through the years, while living in unusual circumstances and working under the threat of various strands of malaria and even cholera, I've seen how marvelously the Bishops and the Catholic Church develop pastoral practices in times of crisis. These practices have been reasonable, intelligent, creative and life giving. I admire the patience of so many that are waiting and yearning to receive Holy Communion soon. Today, we renew our pledge to pray for Archbishop Gregory, he is the good shepherd that was sent to guide and protect the flock and this is exactly what he is doing at this time.

In our spiritual life there is no such thing as “a quick fix.” We remember that we are in Lent and living a special time of conversion and grace. Through all of this coronavirus we can ask: What is God saying to us? What is God saying to me personally? Just as we cannot expect to avoid the virus by doing everything “as we have always done it,” so too, we cannot expect to change and grow spiritually if we keep everything the same.

God is the only one that can bring good out of something so evil. Each one of us can certainly appreciate this time to reflect, pray, **STAY AT HOME**, be present with our families and help initiate some lasting changes in our form of life. Let us not waste this precious time, rather be creative in spending real quality time with our loved ones and those we need to forgive and ask forgiveness.

We can trust that God is offering this time as a tremendous opportunity - a blessing not a curse. This is a moment of great humility where we can realize how much we need one other and how much we need our parish family.

We had scheduled the Parish Gala for Saturday, November 14, 2020 and we hope to be able to celebrate it together. The parish office remains **OPEN**, we are here to serve. Take care, I hope to see you soon.

God bless you.

Fr. Emilio Biosca Agüero, ofmcap
Pastor