



Diocese of Worcester  
Office of the Bishop  
49 Elm Street  
Worcester, Massachusetts 01609

March 5, 2020

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In recent days there has been increased discussion of the spread of the COVID-19 influenza or Coronavirus. This is in addition to the concerns health professionals are already voicing with regard to a difficult flu season.

How are we, as faithful sons and daughters of the Church, supposed to respond to these evolving realities?

First, we should respond with prayer and trust in Divine Providence, for while there are always challenges and difficulties in life, God also gives us the grace to sustain us in every trial. No strain of influenza can separate us from the love of Christ, whose command to us, "Be not afraid," should resound in our hearts in these trying times. (Cf. Matthew 10:30-31)

Secondly, as brothers and sisters of him who is "the Truth," we should inform ourselves of the most accurate and proven scientific truth and not resort to the kind of hysterical speculation which so often dominates social media. Indeed, with the threat of regional outbreaks of the COVID-19 virus, even in the United States, now is the time for prudence in planning for a variety of possibilities.

As you know, COVID-19 is a new and potentially more dangerous strain of the influenza virus. While researchers continue to learn more about its modes of transmission and mortality rate, I want to echo the desire by health professionals not to incite panic. We already know that taking the customary precautions for avoiding the spread of the flu can help reduce the transmission of this new strain as well.

At this time, the threat from the COVID-19 virus in Massachusetts is low. Of more immediate concern is the influenza virus or flu, which has been described by Commonwealth health officials as "high" or "very high" in the past few weeks. We can assist in reducing the spread of the flu as well as instill confidence in parishioners that they are safe at Mass. I am urging our priests, therefore, to take the following steps to limit the spread of the influenza virus:

- **education** of all parishioners by distribution of the provided bulletin insert, including at Masses, via Flocknote and on parish websites;
- **reminding** parishioners that the obligation to attend Sunday Mass is lifted when they are ill and that avoiding spreading illness is a Christian act of charity. Parishioners should also be assured that they can pray at home with the local Catholic community by viewing the Sunday Mass on cable TV and the internet, which is available on your eCatholic website so that they are still "visiting" your parish and accessing all other parish resources;
- **suspension**, for the immediate future, of the distribution of the Precious Blood and omitting the Exchange of the Sign of Peace;
- **removal** of standing Holy Water in all fonts, keeping in mind that small bottles of Holy Water might be appropriately provided for parishioners;

- **limiting** shaking hands with parishioners at the end of Mass;
- **regular cleaning** of pew backs and other surfaces where pathogens may be passed from person to person and frequent, thorough cleaning of all restroom and kitchen facilities to reduce spreading germs, while developing a schedule with staff and volunteers to assist with this task.

As more information about COVID-19 is made available by proper authorities, the Diocese is carefully considering what further actions might prove to be helpful or necessary, including a thoughtful response to any governmental restrictions on public gatherings. Please be assured that we are staying in touch with local and statewide medical professionals to provide further direction and advice to pastors as such issues arise.

For those parishes with schools, please be assured that our Catholic Schools Office is in regular contact with public authorities and will be in direct contact with your schools should additional steps be required. In the meantime, the same common-sense steps outlined above can be equally effective in schools and all parish facilities.

Finally, we should take to heart the spiritual lessons which can be learned during this Lent of prayer, penance and influenza, for sickness reminds us of how utterly dependent we are on God's will for our lives. Indeed, if we accept all the blessings God bestows on us, should we not be willing to join our crosses to his Cross as well?

Who can forget the struggles of Pope Saint John Paul II in his old age and the example he provided us of patient acceptance of God's will? Indeed, he was the perfect example of the words he wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, n. 30. There he reflected on how we are called to see sickness as something more than a personal tragedy, but rather as an opportunity "to release love, in order to give birth to works of love towards neighbor, in order to transform the whole of human civilization into a civilization of love."

Through the intercession of Pope Saint John Paul II, may God hear our prayers for all our brothers and sisters who are ill or suffering in any way, that they may receive a full measure of the Lord's peace, healing and strength.

With every prayerful best wish, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Robert J. McManus".

Most Reverend Robert J. McManus  
Bishop of Worcester