



## DIOCESE OF CHEYENNE

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From: Bishop Steven Biegler and Director of Pastoral Formation Joseph Wotawa

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Re: Theological Answers to Questions

Dear fellow faithful,

We find ourselves in a time of uncertainty. Without the ability to rely on those habits, relationships, and celebrations that we use to mark ourselves as the people of God, we might find ourselves feeling adrift, cut off, or even angry. In response to questions, concerns, or criticisms of Diocesan policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, we would like to offer theological reasoning for these precautionary measures regarding our shared life of worship.

We are called as the people of God to practice our faith in a new way because of the spread of COVID-19. Following are some principles, identified by Bishop Steven as guideposts, which will help us:

- First in [2009](#) and later again in [2012](#), Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI identified the need for **co-responsibility** of the laity with their clergy. At this time of ensuring the health of all, this virtue of co-responsibility reminds us that we all must prioritize the good of each of our neighbors in following the instructions of public officials.
- While we would like stability, at this time we have the call to **agility**. We can look to the Desert Fathers as a model of agility, who maintained faithful worship in harsh environments.
- Of high importance, the virtue of **solidarity** must guide our hearts. Saint John Paul II described solidarity as a “moral category” with an emphasis on “interdependence” ([SRS, 38](#)). For us to promote the good health of all, we must all encourage each other to act in unison with this social virtue of solidarity and maintain social distancing. Pope Francis has urged business leaders to practice solidarity as well. While he acknowledged that he is not knowledgeable in business management and the struggles of maintaining a business with staggering production losses, he said, “I do know the hardships that will face the employee, the workers and their families . . . Every man for himself is not a solution . . . A business that lays off employees to save itself is not a solution. In this moment, instead of laying off, we must welcome and make everyone feel that there is a society of solidarity” ([America](#)).

People rightly have questions about the Diocese’s policies regarding the sacraments. Some of the more common questions at this time follow, with the rationale of the Diocese for its responses:

- *Is watching recordings or live-streams of the Mass the best option right now?*

Of note, Pope Francis has offered a [plenary indulgence](#) to those who “unite spiritually through the media to the celebration of Holy Mass.” Bishop Steven will offer this opportunity on Sundays during the COVID-19 pandemic through the [diocesan webpage](#).

It is important to remember, though, that watching a live-stream or recording of the Mass is not a replacement for liturgical celebration. In this time of journeying in the desert, we must maintain the belief, “In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else” ([SC 14](#)). In this interest, we strongly encourage all the faithful to consult the [diocesan webpage](#) for resources in celebrating the Liturgy of the Word at home and practicing other devotions.

- *Why can't the clergy distribute Holy Communion to me while I am in my car?*

The practice of distributing Holy Communion outside of the Eucharistic celebration first emerged in the early Church in consideration of those who could not be present for the celebration itself, often because of sickness. We have continued that practice today.

While personal devotion to the Eucharist is encouraged, the celebration of the Eucharist, first and foremost, is a public act of the assembled people of God: “The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration” ([SC 48](#)).

The act of assembling is also central to Communion (cf. [CCC 1329](#)). Since we are unable to gather at this time for Eucharistic worship, it is encouraged that the faithful supplement any viewing of Mass with the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word at home. We offer this encouragement in the allowance made through [Canon 1248 §2](#): “If participation in the eucharistic celebration becomes impossible because of the absence of a sacred minister or for another grave cause, it is strongly recommended that the faithful take part in a liturgy of the word if such a liturgy is celebrated in a parish church or other sacred place according to the prescripts of the diocesan bishop or that they devote themselves to prayer for a suitable time alone, as a family, or, as the occasion permits, in groups of families.”

- *The sacrament of reconciliation is not a public gathering. Why can't I receive this sacrament?*

In the interest of minimizing the risk of spreading the contagion, we have suspended the practice of this sacrament unless danger of death is present. It is important to remember, “The purpose of the sacraments is to sanctify men, to build up the body of Christ, and, finally, to give worship to God” ([SC 59](#)). At this moment, the practice of this sacrament would not build up the Body of Christ because of the inherent danger posed in the possible transmission of the virus from priest to penitent, penitent to priest, and penitent to penitent.

In this time of increased stress, isolation and anxiety, each person should make a daily examination of conscience and a sincere Act of Contrition, which obtains forgiveness of all sin, even “mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible” ([CCC](#) 1452).

- *What allows Bishop Steven to withhold my right to Holy Communion?*

[Canon 912](#) does state, “Any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to Holy Communion.” However, given the severity of our current public health crisis, Bishop Steven is suspending practice of public celebrations of the sacraments under the allowance of [Canon 1248 §2](#), mentioned above, and [Canon 223 §2](#). The virulence of the Coronavirus is a grave cause, as the very act of public, sacramental worship threatens the health and lives of many. In the interest of protecting public health and encouraging all to lives of faith, hope, and charity, the Diocese has suspended public sacraments, save for urgent and severe circumstances. For this reason, Bishop Steven has dispensed the faithful of the Diocese of Cheyenne from the obligations of participating in these celebrations.

We greatly anticipate when we gather again around the Lord’s Table so the source and summit of our Christian lives may be celebrated in the Eucharist (see [LG](#) 11). Our communion, which is the source of our practice of solidarity, remains. To help maintain this communion through liturgical worship, please consult with your local parish and the prayer resources on the [webpage of the Diocese of Cheyenne](#).

At this time, let us follow the model of St. Paul. He had never visited the Church in Rome, yet he shared these very dear words with them: “For I long to see you, that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened, that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by one another’s faith, yours and mine” (Rom 1:11-12).



Bishop Steven Biegler



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