March 17, 2020

Dear Father,

As you can imagine, we are still trying to determine the proper actions to take during this unprecedented time. Therefore, I ask in advance for your patience and understanding as we try to sort these various issues.

It is absolutely imperative that each of us takes seriously the guidance from government and health officials during this time. Lives depend on what we do, including the lives of the most vulnerable, the infirm and the elderly.

To clarify and modify some of the instructions from yesterday regarding the hearing of confessions:

1) **Confessions** may be heard at the usual scheduled times for your parish. To reduce the risk of contagion as much as possible, the following directives are **obligatory**:

   a) There must be a distance of at least six (6) feet between the confessor and the penitent. How you will arrange this depends on the configuration of your confessional.

   - If there is a screen available, it must be utilized;
   - The penitent is to stand, not kneel, to reduce the risk of spreading illness by touching surfaces;
   - Confessions are to be heard as quickly as possible;
   - People awaiting confession are to spread throughout the church, maintaining distances of at least six (6) feet from each other.

If you do not have confessionals that would make this arrangement possible, you will need to establish an arrangement in the church itself to make the above directives possible. In such cases, in order to maintain the secrecy of the confessional, the faithful would need to wait outside the church door until their turn to enter the church for confession.

I also very much encourage you to have sanitation wipes available for people entering the church. However, I recognize this may be difficult because these wipes are not readily available at the moment. Please take every action you can to ensure that the church is kept clean and sanitized.
b) Unless there is danger of death, priests are not to make home visits to hear confessions. Priests can be unknowing carriers of the coronavirus, and so we must make every effort to avoid spreading the illness.

c) Unless there is danger of death, people are to be most strongly encouraged to partake of the sacrament at the scheduled times and not by appointment. If such a situation were to arise, that confession must be heard in the confessional or the church (depending upon your particular arrangement) and NOT in the parish office or rectory.

2) Holy Communion may be distributed to the faithful only as Viaticum. (Please see nos. 3 and 4 for exceptions).

3) Weddings. If possible, I encourage that weddings be postponed. If they cannot be postponed, the wedding may be celebrated. However, all government guidelines regarding size of the congregation must be respected (at this time in Ohio, the limit is at 50 people). Any family members or guests who are ill or symptomatic should not attend, of course. A wedding outside of Mass is the rite recommended to be used. However, if it is a Mass, I ask you to use your prudence regarding the distribution of Communion, observing all hygiene protocols.

4) Funerals. Funeral Masses may be celebrated. However, all government guidelines regarding size of the congregation must be respected (at this time in Ohio, the limit is at 50 people). Any family members or guests who are ill or symptomatic should not attend, of course. A funeral outside of Mass is the rite recommended to be used. However, if it is a Mass, I ask you to use your prudence regarding the distribution of Communion, observing all hygiene protocols.

5) Baptisms. Baptisms, if possible, should be postponed. In a case of urgency, the baptism may be celebrated with immediate family and godparents only.

In all of these situations, the priests and the faithful must follow the guidelines from the CDC and other agencies regarding social distancing, proper hygiene, and all other protocols. Please remind the people at weddings and funerals of the necessity of maintaining space between them in the pews.

We will soon be sending you specific guidelines regarding how to celebrate the anointing of the sick as safely as possible and rubrical information on celebrating Mass privately.

These restrictions are causing great suffering, both on the part of the faithful as well as on us priests. After all, we were ordained primarily to celebrate the sacraments for the People of God, and these restrictions are in contradiction to our own pastoral desires and inclinations. However, in the midst of this public health crisis, they are absolutely necessary.
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I most strongly encourage you to celebrate Mass privately every day, in addition to Sundays. I do not think I need to say it, but in order to eliminate any confusion if it exists, while the faithful are dispensed from the Sunday obligation of participating in Mass, priests are not. Please remember your people at the altar of the Lord, knowing that every celebration of the Mass is a celebration of the whole Church.

While we entrust our lives and our world to Our Lord and trust in His providence, we must at the same time exercise prudence and follow the lawful directives from our leaders. To do otherwise would be unreasonable. Let us implore the Immaculate Heart of our Blessed Mother for her intercession.

With gratitude and prayerful best wishes to you, I remain

Fraternally yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Jeffrey M. Monforton
Bishop of Steubenville