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March 17, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

In light of more recent developments concerning the Coronavirus and its effect on the most vulnerable of our faith family, particularly our elderly, all public Masses in the Diocese of Ogdensburg beginning Wednesday, March 18 are suspended until further notice. We will keep you informed as to when they will resume. During this time period, all the faithful are dispensed from their Sunday obligation to participate at Mass.

This difficult decision for me to ask people not to gather for the Holy Eucharist is made in consideration of strong recommendations from public health officials and after consultation with my vicars and some Deans. Care and concern for everyone's health (spiritual, emotional and physical), especially elderly persons, those with underlying health issues, our clergy and liturgical ministers necessitates this extraordinary measure.

Until public Masses are reinstated, priests are encouraged to offer Mass in private. As Catholics, caring for our spiritual and sacramental lives is most important. Therefore, our priests will continue to be available for sacramental emergencies while maintaining the necessary public health precautions.

At the pastor's discretion, churches may remain open for private prayer. Public devotions such as the Stations of the Cross should be suspended. However, the faithful are encouraged to make those devotions in private. If a church is open, pastors will ensure that there is a thorough daily cleaning of all surfaces and that social distancing (at least six feet) is maintained.

Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals raise particular concerns. These celebrations may proceed but attendance should be limited to immediate family and all public health precautions must be observed. Of course, in the case of emergency, Baptism and the Anointing of the Sick should be conferred. The individual reception of the Sacrament of Penance (Confession) may continue to be offered. We are not in a situation that requires general absolution.

Although public Masses are cancelled, your parish will continue to face its financial obligations to employees and others. Please help your parish out by mailing your offering or by online contributions. Your pastor will strive to meet payroll and other essential parish bills during this time. Your continued support of your parish is urgently needed and gratefully received at this difficult time. At the pastor's discretion, parish offices may remain open with essential staff. Pastors will ensure regular thorough cleaning of the office space and appropriate social distancing for the benefit of all. For any questions, please contact your pastor.

We continue to pray for our diocesan family. We pray for healing for those already afflicted with the virus. May our Blessed Mother intercede with her Son, for those who are hurting, the vulnerable and the fearful. May our response to this crisis, be strengthened through prayer and sacrifice as our Lenten journey continues. I'm so grateful for your prayerful support.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Terry R. LaValley
Bishop of Ogdensburg