



DIOCESE *of* LACROSSE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

14 May 2020
Year of Saint Joseph

Dear Brother Priests and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

May the Lord give you peace.

I begin this letter to you by sharing some of the thoughts of my Brother, His Eminence, Cardinal Blase Cupich, the Archbishop of Chicago. I have asked his permission to share his thoughts, I find them remarkably in line with my own.

These fifty days of Easter, leading to Pentecost, are marked by unprecedented suffering, as humanity has fallen victim to a perilous contagion. In addition to the threats to our physical wellbeing, we are suffering spiritually as the Covid-19 pandemic has required restrictions of our worship and active participation in the sacramental life of the Church. Surely, there have been moments in history when governments and rulers have persecuted Christians and banned their public worship. This is not one of them. Rather, the present restrictions come in response to an extreme medical emergency as local, state and federal authorities – specifically public health officials – legitimately fulfil their responsibilities to safeguard human life and the common good. They have based their reasonable guidance on careful consideration of empirical data and the best available disease-mitigation practices as they seek to contain the pandemic's rampage through our communities.

While everyone must exercise good citizenship in observing these restrictions, I call on the Catholic faithful, as advocates for justice and charity, to comply with these regulations. From the first pages of Scripture we learn that we indeed are "our brother's keeper," a truth that must inspire us as we are called to sacrifice. We should also be motivated to cooperate with public safety norms, given our reverence for life and human dignity. This is, at its heart, a moment to proclaim the breadth and depth of what it means to be pro-life, particularly as this virus preys on the most vulnerable in our midst.

The good news is that a plan for a gradual reopening of our churches has now taken shape, as I note in this letter. Yesterday (13 May, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima) the Wisconsin State Supreme Court struck down the extension of the "Safer at Home" order of Governor Evers. This shifts much decision making regarding COVID-19 safeguards to the county level. It allows me to speak clearly and with a bit more freedom concerning our return to the public celebration of the Holy Mass. I, like most of you, have longed for this return to some resemblance of normalcy, but I am also responsible for the safety of all who enter our Churches and participate at the Mass (including our priests). *The corona virus is real and has severe consequences for those infected by it, particularly those of advanced years and those with underlying health conditions.*

The simple truth is that in many, if not most, of our parishes we are not ready to return to the public celebration because we do not have the proper supplies to open with safety. The scarcity of hand sanitizer and disinfectants in addition to many other proper supplies will greatly limit our efforts. We also need time for pastors to recruit and train *non-vulnerable* volunteers so that our return may include ushers who will ensure proper social distancing, parking lot attendants, and other helpers. Simply to open the doors without a structured plan in place hoping that people do the right thing would be irresponsible of us all. Last week people gathered outside our beloved Cathedral praying the Rosary for the return of the public celebration of the Mass. I felt their deep faith and the longing that they have for the Sacraments of the Church, for I share them, but not one of them captured on camera social distancing or wearing masks but seemed to be acting as if the corona virus is no threat. This does not give me confidence that the safe return will "just happen": it needs to be planned for and enacted.

With this in mind, the Bishops of the Province of Wisconsin have been working on a plan of returning to the public celebration of the Mass. The Bishops' document is being published on our website at the same time this letter is being sent to you, so that the faithful, as well as the priests, will understand what is being required for this safe return. It is all of our responsibilities to love our neighbor, to act as the Good Samaritan, sacrificing for the good of the other. At this time, and in times I have addressed you in the past, I believe that a slow controlled return to the public celebrations of the sacraments is necessary and in our best interest.

Because of the Supreme Court's decision, we may not be able to have a unified return throughout the whole Diocese since each county will be responsible to make its own orders based on the local circumstances in that county. Regrettably, therefore, I cannot make a decree for the whole of the Diocese of when things will definitely be open. I can and am stating that we **will not** have public celebrations any earlier than 31 May 2020 (the Solemnity of Pentecost), and only when I am assured that:

- the proper supplies are on hand,
- training of sufficient and non-vulnerable volunteers, has occurred, and that
- the 25% of occupancy standards will be kept along with social distancing requirements.

I ask, that for now, we also restrain from congregating before or after the Mass any place on church property we should maintain a six to eight-foot distance from all who are not from the same household.

As we roll back into these public celebrations, I must highlight that the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays remains dispensed. No one is required, under the pain of mortal sin, to attend Mass until further notice. In fact, at this time I encourage those over 65 and particularly those with underlying health conditions to stay home. I ask those parishes that have the ability to livestream the Mass to continue to do so for the sake of those who will not be able to attend. Sunday Mass will continue to be televised for the sick and homebound. Please be assured of our continued prayer for you.

I share prayers and thanks to my brother Bishops in the Province of Wisconsin. We have been meeting, discussing, and trying to dialogue about this entire time of pain and struggle for all of us. We share continued strength and our sincere prayers for all you, our people.

Finally, may I offer a personal word for all of you, my dear brother priests and dear people of God. I have heard from many different sources, phone calls, emails, letters and even public media, that many of you are upset, angry, and hostile about my apparent insufficient care and concern for you and for what many of you also think is my lack of love and respect for the sacramental life of the Church. Nothing could be further from the truth. I have been deeply frightened by this disease and by its presence among us. I am afraid for those who help us and protect us—the first responders and medical people. I am sorry that many folks who sent word to me expressed their thoughts by saying I was acting as a puppet of the State and not an agent of the Church. Dear brothers and sisters, all I can tell you is that I am doing my best and I will continue to love you and pray for you. God reward you.

Very truly yours in Jesus and Mary, I am

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ William Patrick Callahan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+William Patrick Callahan
Bishop