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## OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

March 15, 2020

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we navigate these stormy waters of the COVID-19 crisis, we find ourselves tossed about by fear, anxiety, doubt and confusion. It is not easy to fight an enemy that we cannot see and yet fight it we must since for a few, lives lay in the balance. As Catholics, we prudently rely on the scientific and medical communities to steer us clear of disaster and help us find safe shores. But we also recall that it was the Lord who calmed the storm for the disciples. We must also rely on God's grace since ultimately we walk "...by faith, not by sight." (2 Cor. 5:7) As your bishop, I wish to assure you that I stand with you during this health crisis, praying for you and doing all that I can to protect and comfort you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, as well as those in whose midst we live here in New Mexico. In turn, I am deeply grateful for your support and the assurances I have received these past few days.

As people of faith, we are challenged to respond to what has now been labeled a "pandemic" with a common sense approach recommended by health professionals and yet at the same time trusting in Divine Providence, which, as Shakespeare has Hamlet say, "shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we will." When does science end and faith begin? Or, are they both at play at the same time?

Many have thanked me for cancelling church services for a time while others have scolded me for doing so. The reasons are mixed but they all point to a similar conundrum that lies at the intersection of faith and reason. While there is not much I can do to find a vaccine for COVID-19, I do hope by this letter to give a context to the decisions I have made thus far in responding to the current crisis. It is a kind of Lenten longing that we face these days.

Of paramount importance is that the cancellation of church services, including the celebration of the Eucharist, does not mean that we have ceased to provide pastoral care. This epidemic has disturbed all of our lives, so it is even more critical that we care in a special way for the spiritual life granted us by grace. It is my desire and that of all our priests, deacons, religious and lay leaders to continue to care for our Catholic faithful. That care will be immediately expressed in our prayer as well as in ongoing pastoral ministry. As you know from the statement of March 13, 2020, individual confessions will continue to be heard as long as parishioners abide by the core instructions of washing hands before and

after being in church, keeping the proper social distance and not touching the face, etc. Priests will continue to provide the Sacrament of the Sick and the Last Rites, carefully observing the proper protocols and being sure to properly dispose of the oil used. The Archdiocese of Santa Fe and many of its parishes are providing televised, taped and livestreamed Masses so the faithful can pray with the celebrant from home and make a “spiritual Communion.” Funeral services (without Mass) may be held with a very small number of congregants. Prayers are being disseminated through our communications department. And our priests and other church leaders are creatively reaching out to our people in caring and creative ways. We are the People of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, who continue to deepen the bonds that unite us, despite services being cancelled and despite the challenges posed by this pandemic.

In addition, there are some specific points that I would like to pose for your consideration as well, hoping that they will assist you in coming to a deeper understanding of the temporary restrictions in place. We must exercise great caution that amid all the clamor and confusion we attentively hear the Word of God who stills our restless hearts.

**1. Some have objected to the cancellation of Masses and therefore the inability to receive Holy Communion.**

I am deeply grateful for the devotion to the Eucharist expressed by these parishioners. As the Second Vatican Council said in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “... the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.” It is the source and summit of all we are as Catholics. I am therefore most sympathetic with the sentiment expressed by these faithful. At the same time, it is important to remember that these Masses were only cancelled when it was absolutely clear that our people would be put at risk if they gathered for Mass. Viruses are communicated very easily in groups, especially in large numbers. We are keeping our churches open for individual prayer and/or confession but even this is a risk, mitigated, but not eliminated, by the washing of hands and not touching the face. On the spiritual plane, Jesus is present to us in many ways: in prayer, as we read the scriptures, in doing acts of charity, in contemplation, etc. Indeed, Christ is closer to us than we are to ourselves. I understand that it is a great sacrifice not to have the Mass even for a short time but we must not overlook the many ways Christ is present to us.

**2. Some are concerned about the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday.**

Due to the emergency we are experiencing, all Catholics are excused from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass by the law itself. This obligation is suspended in cases of moral or physical impossibility, and may also be dispensed for a just cause when it is for the spiritual good of the faithful. In addition, the Church also has the obligation to protect those who are most vulnerable and those who care for the sick. Therefore, under Canon 87 §1 (cf. canon 1245), I have dispensed Catholics from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass for the next two Sundays (March

22, March 29) and will re-evaluate the situation in two weeks' time. While failing to fulfill one's Sunday obligation without proper cause is grave and serious our current epidemic is just reason for my dispensation.

I would strongly recommend that our faithful gather on Sunday to pray over the Gospel of the day, either individually or as a family. As I have mentioned, the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, along with many parishes, is making livestreamed Masses available. There will be a Sunday Mass livestreamed from the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis at 10:00 a.m. for the next two Sundays and beyond, if necessary. (This is NOT a scheduled Mass at the cathedral. I will celebrate this Mass privately and it will be livestreamed for the faithful.) In addition, individuals or families can pray the rosary, the Liturgy of the Hours (available online) or use other prayers such as those attached to this letter. I also recommend that we all consider special Lenten practices to accompany our prayer by which we seek God's grace during this difficult time.

**3. Some have expressed the notion that they are not afraid of the corona virus and would rather trust in God and receive Communion.**

Grace builds on nature. Or, as St. Thomas Aquinas puts it, "Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it." In the article I have appended to this letter by Bishop Raymond Centène in the Diocese of Vanne in northwest France, the point is made that this thinking tends toward *Fideism*, i.e., the belief that knowledge depends on faith or is somehow secondary to the world as we know it. Instead, grace builds on and perfects nature. We cannot live our lives of faith without grounding them in reality. We cannot help others if we are so sick that we are bed-ridden. Faith compliments reason and we Catholics are called to see how faith calls us to live reasonably, using the creation God has given us as a pathway to our final home in heaven. In other words, it is not reasonable to risk sickness and even death on the premise that faith has called me to do so. Even Our Lord condemns this kind of fideism, this unthinking legalism, when he challenges the Sabbath laws. Reason and common sense are not antithetical to faith. It is also important to remember that it is not just my life at stake here. If I take imprudent risks, I can also infect and jeopardize another person. Even though one longs to receive Holy Communion and has a right to do so, that person must not fail to take into consideration the good of the community.

After all is said and done, we are called to be a people of faith. In this critical time as I struggle to understand our Lord's hand in the drastic measures that must be taken, I am aware that our Eucharistic Fast, this abstinence from the Church's celebration of the Eucharist, is an invitation to our deeper appreciation of the Eucharist itself. I believe that we are being called to reflect on the Stripping of the Altar that happens after the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper. The absence of the Eucharistic celebration all the way to the Easter Vigil is a sober time when we join our Lord in the tomb and no Mass is celebrated throughout the Church. It is a time for each of us to grow in appreciation of the Lord's real presence in the Body of Christ, the Church, if even by its absence we keep vigil at the tomb. This is our Good Friday as we await the Easter promise.

In the attached article from the New York Times, Dr. McCaulley reminds us that in Jesus's final discourse in John's Gospel, the disciples are told that it is better if Jesus is absent for a while so that he can send the Holy Spirit. As Dr. McCauley puts it: "The point is that the loss of his physical presence through his death, resurrection and ascension would lead to an even deeper communion with God. It is possible that, strangely enough, the absence of the church will be a great testimony to the presence of God in our care for our neighbors." As members of the Body of Christ here in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, we are present to one another in our absence, we are united in our social distancing and we care for one another by staying home.

I cannot begin to tell you how grateful I am to our priests, lay leaders, deacons and religious for their service during these difficult times. I am also grateful to my colleagues at the Catholic Center and to the other religious communities that grace our archdiocese. The Catholic Church is no stranger to epidemics and plagues. Throughout our history we have endured calamities galore and have passed through them with God's grace and the good will and pastoral outreach of so many dedicated men and women. This time is no different. Let us continue to pray for one another, asking God to deliver us from the scourge of illness and to especially help those who have been affected and all those on the medical front lines. Please refer to our website for prayers that you can download and pray during the current crisis. You can also contact Ms. Celine Radigan at 505-831-8231 if you have any questions, comments or concerns. I have appended some articles that you may find helpful as well.

I pray that the Lord of Life and All Healing will raise his arms of benediction over us and the whole world in our time of need. And may Nuestra Senora de la Paz, who has been with us in this sacred place since 1598, intercede for us, her children, as we seek her help and guidance. May God bless you and may Mary, Health of Christians, pray for us.

Your Servant in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ John C. Wester". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend John C. Wester  
Archbishop of Santa Fe