



March 20, 2020

Dear Monsignors/Fathers and Deacons,

As the global and local situation continues to unfold, I want to update and extend some of the guidelines that were issued this past Tuesday, March 17th. In addition to addressing sacramental and parish matters, I also invite you to consider a newly implemented pastoral leadership check-in conference call on Tuesday mornings from 9-10 AM.

I commend your flexibility and pastoral initiative on several fronts as you care for souls. Accounts trickle in about what's happening at the parish level; ordinarily, I want to respect your pastoral prerogative. Since Tuesday, I have received some suggestions and requests for permission for various practices; this memo is a general response to those requests. At the same time, though I will not provide theological commentary in this communication, I also ask for your consistent adherence to what are now diocesan-wide guidelines aimed at the overall physical and spiritual health of our people in accord with civil authorities.

“Social distancing” (I appreciate Fr. Tim Fitzgerald’s comment that what is meant is “physical distancing,” and that socially we want to draw closer to one another more than ever through appropriate means) indicates that we limit our time and proximity with one another.

Mass, Sacraments, and Distribution of Communion:

1. Public celebration of Holy Mass in the Des Moines Diocese remains cancelled until further notice. Televised or electronic communication of Mass celebrated **without a congregation** (though accompanied by a single or minimally necessary number of ministers such that the total number present is no more than 10 persons) is possible, and has been widely adopted by many parishes; televised celebration of Mass is also permitted in health care settings with authorization within those institutions.

2. Funerals, weddings, and other celebrations and prayers may take place if there are no more than 10 people present, and are at this point best celebrated without the Eucharist in order to limit time exposure. For pastoral reasons, many of these celebrations are postponed until further notice.
3. Distribution of communion: The primary purpose for reservation of the Blessed Sacrament is Viaticum, and secondarily, for Communion for the sick. The Rite for Communion is to be integrally celebrated, and reverence for the Sacrament upheld. Hence,
 - a) Communion outside Mass is to be celebrated as Viaticum and in the context of ministry to the sick (directly personal pastoral care) using the proper Rites.
 - b) In order to protect the most vulnerable, regular communion visits to the homebound (whether in their own homes or in extended care facilities) are suspended. While individual ministry to the sick is permitted, routine communion visits to the hospital (communion rounds to multiple rooms) are suspended. Ministers are to abide by healthcare facility regulations.
 - c) There is to be no communion celebration of Communion outside of Mass, whether by clergy or extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion (EMHC).
 - d) “Drive-by” or “stop-by” distribution of Communion on or near church premises—even succeeding celebration of Mass inside the church—is not permitted. This removes Communion from its proper liturgical context. It also provides an occasion where people tend to congregate at church, even if measures seek to “space” or regulate the flow of people.
 - e) EMHCs are entitled to opt out of bringing communion to the sick. If they continue to exercise their ministry, they are not to bring the Sacrament home at all, and certainly not for personal reception.
 - f) The Blessed Sacrament is to remain reserved in a properly secured tabernacle. It is not to be set in a monstrance in a rectory or other site to be viewed through a window. Priest pastors may use their discretion to keep churches open for visits to the Blessed Sacrament or periods of personal prayer, so long as no more than 10 persons are present at any given time. Pastors are strongly encouraged to withdraw the tabernacle key from its usual location and secure it elsewhere until further notice.

Plenary Indulgence

Yesterday the Church published a plenary indulgence for people who are sick with the coronavirus COVID-19, and anyone caring for people who are sick with the coronavirus COVID-19, and people who are quarantined because of the coronavirus COVID-19

The conditions for receiving the plenary indulgence are: a spirit of detachment from any sin (like saying “I hate sin”); the intention to go to Confession, receive Holy Communion, and pray for the Pope’s intentions as soon as possible; participate (even via the media) in the celebration of Holy Mass, or the Rosary, or

the Way of the Cross, or if that isn't possible, to recite the Creed, the Our Father and the Hail Mary.

During this time of pandemic, a plenary indulgence is also available to the Catholic faithful who – in addition to having a spirit of detachment from any sin, have the intention to go to Confession, receive Holy Communion and pray for the Pope's intentions as soon as possible – make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or read Scripture for at least 30 minutes, or pray the Rosary, or make the Way of the Cross, or recite the Divine Mercy chaplet for the following intentions: an end to the pandemic, relief to those afflicted, and eternal salvation for those who have died.

Finally, a plenary indulgence is granted to people at the moment of death, when they are unable to receive Anointing and Viaticum. The only conditions are that the person be properly disposed, have recited a few prayers during his/her lifetime, and at the moment of death to hold or look at a cross or crucifix, if possible.

General Absolution

Also yesterday, the Apostolic Penitentiary in the Vatican offered the opinion that the grave necessity needed to offer general absolution (they use the term *collective* absolution) exists as long as the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic continues.

If general absolution is imparted, this implies that there more than just one person is gathered. Here in the United States, at present, according to CDC guidelines, there may not be more than 10 people gathered at one time, and those gathered have to distance themselves from each other.

General absolution is given in the context of a brief celebration: Sign of the Cross; Greeting; Opening Prayer; Reading from Scripture; Exhortation; kneel or bow the head and pray the Confiteor; recite the Lord have mercy litany; pray the Our Father; imposition of a penance; and Absolution.

The people gathered should be reminded that they are to have sorrow for sin, the purpose to amend their lives, and the intention to confess any mortal sin to a priest as soon as that might be possible.

I will leave it to an individual priest's discretion to determine if, when, and where general absolution will be used, with this proviso: it may used only during the time when we are not able to assemble more than 10 people, who must practice social/physical distancing.

People might also be reminded that if they are not able to go to Confession, they can receive absolution from even their mortal sins if they express to the best of

their ability sorrow for sin motivated by love of God (called perfect contrition), and have the intention to confess any mortal sin to a priest as soon as that might be possible (see Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 1452).

Fish Frys

My memo of March 17th clearly stated that all parish events where people physically gather are to be cancelled unless an electronic means of engagement was available, and explicitly mentioned fish frys. I have come to recognize that fish frys have achieved almost sacramental status in some locales (☺!?). Some of you have elected to proceed on your own terms, perhaps thinking, “it is easier to ask forgiveness than permission.” No longer will this be the case.

Several of you have inquired whether a fish fry could be offered as take-out or even delivery. I appreciate the desire to offer people something that resembles normal communal relations at this time. However, after prayerful discernment, I have decided against allowing this exception. At this moment, we need to do everything we can to encourage our people to stay at home. We are being asked to “fast” from social interactions we normally take for granted in order to protect the common good.

I am aware that restaurants are offering this accommodation. However, their existence and the livelihood of their employees is at stake. This is not the case for parish fish frys, where I am aware how many are staffed by those considered at highest risk from this virus. With a sense of the proportionality of risk and in my prudential judgment, in order not to risk compromising the health either of servers, clients, or those for whom they might become unconscious vectors of the virus, **I uphold the prohibition on all fish frys and deny any exception for take-out or delivered distribution.**

Parish Employment Practices

On March 17th, I also shared with you the policies going forward of the Diocesan Pastoral Center, which includes the pending closure of the Pastoral Center to the public, opportunities for at-risk employees to work from home, and a mixed schedule of on-site and off-site fulfillment of duties for essential and other employees. I have come to be aware that various staff accommodations have been made in our diocesan parishes. While it has been concluded by our legal counsel that no OSHA-related exposure is likely under these present circumstances, I have also become aware that some of you are very dogged in expecting staff to be present in the office during normal working hours.

I highly encourage you to be flexible and solicitous of your parish staff's sensibilities and fears in the present environment. While you are not strictly obliged to permit them to work from home, I ask you to be discerning and

mindful of their personal family situation and states of mind in this most unusual crisis. Any accommodation you can tender to them would go a long way to honoring personal dignity and giving witness to the values for which we stand as a Church and a people. Be assured that these accommodations pertain specifically to the state of

affairs we face with coronavirus COVID-19, and cannot be automatically extrapolated to any other situation going forward.

Pastoral Leadership Weekly Check-In

Please know of my admiration for the many different ways you are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in your local community as well as supporting the Diocesan guidelines. The goal as a Pastoral Center staff is to keep you updated in a timely manner that enhances your leadership and pastoral effectiveness. To help all of us, we are creating a standard meeting titled Pastoral Leadership Check-in that will be held between 9:00 and 10:00 am every Tuesday. We will use the digital conference technology of GoTo Meeting. Please find a link below. This is a standing opportunity for all priests, but especially those who are pastors, to gather and share. During our hour together we will learn about the local landscape across our diocese, have an opportunity to ask questions, share pastoral accompaniment ideas you have initiated, and some time for immediate responses to a few of your questions. Many of your questions will be taken to the Executive Committee, whose meeting follows this digital session, or to other Pastoral Center staff for responses at a later time.

My hope is that with a weekly check-in, we will more effectively accompany you as our essential leaders throughout the Diocese and respond in a timely manner to the pastoral needs you see emerging in your parish community(ies). I look forward to our time together beginning on March 24 at 9:00 am.

Please join the meeting from your computer, tablet or smartphone.

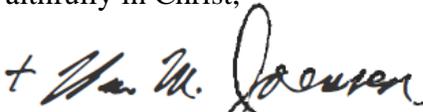
<https://global.gotomeeting.com/join/314625805>

You can also dial in using your phone.

United States: [+1 \(646\) 749-3122](tel:+16467493122)

Access Code: 314-625-805

Faithfully in Christ,



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Bishop of Des Moines