



March 17, 2021

My Dear People of the Diocese of Nashville,

As springtime begins anew, I am pleased to announce a new phase of our response to the covid-19 pandemic that has afflicted our world for over a year. Last week, the three Bishops of Tennessee collaboratively discussed our plans for restoring the obligation to attend Sunday Mass in the State of Tennessee. Here in the Diocese of Nashville, the obligation will return as of the weekend of Palm Sunday, March 28, 2021. The bishops took into account the rapid decline in hospitalizations and deaths, our emergence from the winter flu season, and the now widespread availability of vaccination, in particular those in vulnerable demographic categories. Steadily increasing attendance at Mass is now straining the limited capacity of many of our churches. We have consulted with leaders in the Catholic healthcare system throughout the state, who support our plan and have assured us that it is prudent and reasonable. Therefore, today, exactly one year after the dispensation was put in place, I have signed a decree formally restoring the obligation to attend Mass, effective Palm Sunday.

In conjunction with the lifting of the dispensation, Palm Sunday will also be a time when some of your own parish's covid-related precautions may be modified, including increased seating availability, and the use of facial coverings at some masses or events becoming optional. We will remain prudent, however, as not all precautions will be set aside. I am leaving significant discretion to your pastor, in consultation with lay leadership in the parish, to discern the details of this transition in the way best suited to your community. I also take this opportunity to remind you that, even once the obligation is restored, the law of the Church envisions situations where the obligation does not apply because of a grave cause; serious ongoing risks and concerns you might have about the coronavirus can certainly constitute that grave cause. At the same time, I believe that the health situation now permits a fuller expression of the Church's life and a reasonable courage and confidence in the face of what is now a much-reduced risk. Personal responsibility is a centerpiece of our Faith; each person is called to exercise this responsibility with prudence and wisdom at all times, and especially in times such as this. I humbly ask for your cooperation and flexibility in working with all our pastors and parish leaders as they collaborate with me to navigate this challenging transition to normalcy.

In that light, allow me to take this opportunity to thank you for the extraordinary faithfulness and understanding you have shown and continue to show as we have continued to live the life of our Church during this extraordinary time. We pray that the Divine Physician will protect and defend us, today and always, from all illness of body, mind, and spirit.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend J. Mark Spalding, D.D., J.C.L.

Bishop of Nashville