



May 7, 2020

My Dear People of God,

Over the past several weeks we have all faced unique and unprecedented challenges. In addition to the general stress and anxiety of the current health crisis, we have also had to go without the consolation of the public celebration of Mass. Recognizing that the nature of the situation has necessitated this decision, does not make the pain and sorrow any less real. The temporary cessation of public Masses I announced on March 17<sup>th</sup> was one of the most difficult decisions of my time as bishop. In saying this, I want to express my gratitude for the kindness, patience, and understanding of those who have embraced this decision with humility and trust.

As restrictions on public activities and gatherings begin to ease, it is my great joy to announce that we will begin a journey to resume the public celebration of Mass beginning on Monday, May 18. While a cause for celebration, it is important to recognize at the same time that these first steps are not simply an open call to return as normal. The risk of COVID-19 remains significant, especially to seniors and persons with existing health concerns. As we return to Mass, we must continue to embrace the responsibility of protecting the health and well-being of all in our community. With that in mind, although parishes may resume public Masses beginning May 18<sup>th</sup>, some pastors may prudently decide to wait a few more weeks. We are blessed with a great variety of parishes in this diocese, and that diversity allows for a certain adaptability. We especially do not want to put anyone at undue risk from a hasty or ill-prepared reopening. Our return to church must be measured, prudent, and gradual, as we responsibly respond to the situation.

As we embark on this joyful and yet challenging new journey in the life of our diocese, there are a few points I would like everyone to keep in mind:

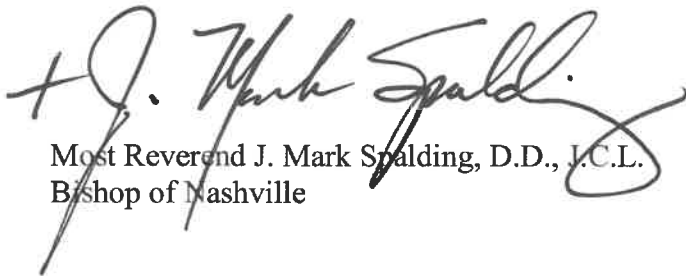
- The ongoing risk of COVID-19 will necessitate some adjustments to the way we are used to celebrating Mass. This may at times lead to discomfort and frustration. The patience and charity of all involved will be essential to handling these changes well. In the coming weeks, let us not lose sight of what a blessing it is to be able to be able to celebrate Mass as a community.
- As we come together, we should be respectful of the norms and guidelines concerning social distancing. These policies are most effective when we work together and are all on the same page. Expect guidance from your parish about strategies for monitoring the capacity of the church and for maintain proper spacing in the pews. Your attentiveness to these measures will help everyone in the community feel more comfortable and peaceful when returning to church.
- The dispensation from Sunday Mass remains in effect through June 30<sup>th</sup>. Those who have an active ongoing illness (including infection, flare of a chronic illness, etc.), anyone over the age of 65, those with a history of heart failure, lung disease, diabetes, ongoing malignancy, any immunosuppressive disorder, those on steroids or other

immunosuppressive medications, those who have been advised by a health care professional not to attend Mass, and those who live with anyone with any health vulnerability, are strongly encouraged to remain at home at this time and refrain from attending Mass. Additionally, anyone who is worried that attending Mass would add undue stress or jeopardize their health or the health of a person with whom they live, are also encouraged to remain at home. I encourage pastors to continue the practice of live-streaming Masses in order to provide for the spiritual nourishment of those remaining at home.

- Similarly, I am encouraging pastors to offer special Masses on weekdays particularly for those 65 years of age or older. If you are a member of this vulnerable age group and wish to attend Mass, I strongly encourage taking advantage of these special Masses, even if you are in good health.
- Finally, please continue to pray! God is with us in this time of trial, and we should never lose sight of that. The inability to attend Mass has meant that many families have introduced new practices of family prayer into their homes. This has been an unexpected grace that has come in the midst of the current crisis. As we return to the communal celebration of Mass, I encourage you to preserve these new practices.

Thank you all for your continued support and cooperation. Please keep our diocese, our churches, and our schools in your prayers in this challenging time. You are all in my prayers as well.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Mark Spalding". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end that loops back under the name.

Most Reverend J. Mark Spalding, D.D., J.C.L.  
Bishop of Nashville