

## Thoughts in the Time of Covid-19—#5, March 27, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters,

Yesterday, my office sent out to the priests and parishes of the Diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall and the Archdiocese of Ottawa directives for the celebration of the Chrism Mass, Holy Week and Easter. I will address the issues at play regarding Holy Week and Easter in a future post. Today I want to share with you our plans for celebrating the Chrism Mass.

While the Sacred Triduum (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday) and Easter are immovable, the timing of the Chrism Mass may be adjusted by the bishop according to local needs. Though it was traditional to celebrate the Chrism Mass on the morning of Holy Thursday, it was difficult in some dioceses for priests to travel from their parishes to the cathedral and back on the same day that also marked the start of the Sacred Triduum.

In Ottawa, the custom in recent years was to celebrate the Chrism Mass on the Tuesday evening in Holy Week, preceded by a penitential service for the priests and a supper at which Jubilarians (priests celebrating major anniversaries—60, 55, 50, 40, 25 years of ordination) were honoured. Following my appointment as the Apostolic Administrator (January 2016) and Bishop of Alexandria-Cornwall (April 2018), we have held a similar celebration in the Alexandria-Cornwall Diocese on the Monday of Holy Week, alternating between Alexandria and Cornwall.

With our two dioceses now collaborating and preparing for amalgamation later this year, I will celebrate the Ottawa Chrism Mass in Notre Dame Cathedral on Tuesday, March 31 at 11:00 AM with the priests who live in my residence (that is with a maximum of ten persons). After civic and health authorities lift the restrictions they have imposed, our plan is to celebrate the Alexandria-Cornwall Chrism Mass in St. Finnan Cathedral in Alexandria, with a broad invitation to priests and parish representatives from both dioceses to come together and celebrate our common purpose. The Priests of both dioceses will renew their priestly promises, parish representatives will receive the newly blessed holy oils and some form of festive celebration will follow the Chrism Mass. It should prove to be a joyous occasion!

The forthcoming unification of the two dioceses is top of mind as a “Transition Committee” meets from time to time to coordinate the variety in practices that has developed over time. This collaboration also explains in part the recent total closure of all churches in both dioceses even to individual prayer.

The closure imposed by the chief medical officer for the Eastern Ontario Health Unit did not extend to the churches in Ottawa itself, but to the two counties of Stormont and Glengarry and the City of Cornwall in the Alexandria-Cornwall diocese and to the combined counties of Prescott-Russell, which constitutes the eastern portion of the Ottawa archdiocese. The concerns for public safety and for prevention of the Corona Virus especially of vulnerable

persons that led to the action taken in Eastern Ontario prompted my decision to apply the closure to all churches, even in the City of Ottawa.

Father Raymond de Souza, in a column on these kinds of issues, observed, “Bishops and pastors are being asked, in a matter of days or even hours, to make decisions that no one alive has ever taken before. In such an environment, the more prudent option—for civil and ecclesiastical authorities—is to take the most severe option sooner rather than later.”

I realize that not everyone agrees with this decision and I have received contrary advice from clergy and laity alike, expressing dissatisfaction with their being deprived of the Eucharist, sacramental confession in most instances, and even of private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. And that is why I look forward to the earliest possible lifting of the restrictions on our public expressions of faith and of a joyous celebration at the Chrism Mass of the Alexandria-Cornwall Diocese, which I expect the Ottawa laity, religious and faithful to attend in large numbers.

May Our Blessed Mother Mary intercede with her Son for us in this moment of darkness and deprivation and obtain for us relief from COVID-19 as soon as possible. Would you also commit to being united in prayer with me and the small number of priests who will celebrate the Chrism Mass in an unprecedented way next Tuesday morning at 11 o’clock?

God bless you.

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