



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH
THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Pastoral Letter

To All Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Men and Women,
and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth

March 13, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

In my pastoral letter of Thursday, March 12, 2020, I counseled that it is incumbent upon us as faithful members of the Church to act with the utmost of solidarity, justice, and prudence in rejecting selfish fear and embracing our responsibility to love our neighbor, especially the vulnerable, for the sake of peace and the common good of our society. The gravity of the pandemic of the coronavirus (COVID-19) requires us to act more prudently in the carrying out of our responsibilities at work and at home. Yet, the common good of society requires that these responsibilities still be met and with greater prudence. Police, firefighters, civil servants, and others are still required to carry out their responsibilities. This is also true for the clergy and lay ministers of the Church.

Currently, in the twenty-eight counties of the territory of the Diocese of Fort Worth, state and national officials have declared emergencies to prevent further outbreaks of COVID-19 by implementing protocols to prevent the spread of the virus. Officials have encouraged people to avoid all non-essential travel and gatherings. These protocols have included the limiting of gatherings to no more than 250 people. The Diocese of Fort Worth and its parishes will cooperate with these directives issued by state and local officials.

These directives of our civic authorities do not mandate that we halt all activities. As a society, we must and will continue to work at our professions as best we can, as well as continue to live our lives, but with vigilance for possible danger and for the protection of those most in danger of harm.

Our spiritual needs, like our other essential needs, do not abate during a time of crisis. In fact, our spiritual needs become even more prominent. We must pray and worship God and ask His assistance as we heed the responsible declaration of our civic officials and make accommodations to our worship and ministry. After consultation with my priests, I issue the following protocols that I am asking our parishes to follow, especially our urban and suburban parishes:

Liturgical Adaptations:

It is the responsibility of priests to ensure that our parishes continue to offer Masses especially during a time of crisis. In cooperation with the directives of our civic and health officials, effective

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immediately I am asking all priests to implement these adaptations beginning with this Saturday evening's Vigil Mass and lasting through Palm Sunday, April 5:

- To celebrate Saturday Vigil and Sunday Masses with no more than 250 people present.
- If necessary, pastors should add more Masses for Sunday to accommodate the larger need for Masses with smaller congregations.
- If necessary, the Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest (SCAP), celebrated by a deacon, may be held in addition to the Sunday Masses. The celebration of SCAP will require that priests consecrate more hosts at their Masses to be used at SCAP.
- If more Masses are scheduled on Sunday, the schedule of Masses should be altered so that Mass takes no more than 40 minutes. If a parish has more than one priest, the starting time for Masses might be staggered by 15 minutes with one Mass celebrated in a parish hall and the other one celebrated in the church sanctuary.
- For purposes of hygiene remove all hymnals and other prayer aids from the pews before the Saturday night Vigil Mass.
- Enlist assistance to sanitize the church (e.g. pews, door handles, etc.) with proper sanitizing products or soap and hot water between Masses.
- Encourage the faithful who cannot or should not attend Mass to spend Sunday in prayer and to read the Sunday readings from the Liturgy. Encourage them also to continue to engage in stewardship through online giving or by mail.
- The Sacrament of Reconciliation/Penance should be celebrated behind the screen only, not face-to-face, for purposes of preventing the spread of contagion.
- All Communal Penance Services in Lent are hereby cancelled.
- Pastors should review with their deacons and pastoral staff the visitation of the homebound and hospitalized in their parish.
- Pastors should consider priority for access to sacraments and pastoral care for first responders involved in tending to this current crisis.
- These contingent changes in the Mass schedule should be promulgated on parish websites by Saturday afternoon.

Please continue to use reasonable precautions to prevent the spread of contagion.

Obligations of charity supersede those of justice. I urge our faithful to use their judgment in consideration of their neighbor in determining whether to attend Mass. People who are sick, who exhibit contagious symptoms, or who are particularly vulnerable to the transmission of the virus *are dispensed as always* in charity from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. *If you're sick, don't come to Mass.* Those who are caretakers of the sick and vulnerable are dispensed as always. To stay home from Sunday Mass in these circumstances is not a mortal sin. In fact, love for our neighbor should prompt each of us not to attend Mass if we are contagious and exhibiting symptoms. Those who are sick should notify their parish for prayers and for ministry.

Parish Events

Parish events will continue at the pastor's discretion in cooperation with the directives of civic officials. Please cancel non-essential gatherings.

Schools

In response to civic and health officials, the buildings of the Catholic schools of the Diocese of Fort Worth will be closed for two weeks, until Monday, March 30, 2020. This accommodation is not a

school vacation but an opportunity to continue education from home. During these two weeks school will continue online as directed by principals, faculty, and the diocesan school office. Each school will use these two weeks to deep clean their facilities. School events will continue at the principal's discretion in cooperation with the directives of civic officials. Please cancel non-essential gatherings.

Once again, I repeat that our baptismal obligations of charity and outreach to those who are most in need should be foremost in our minds during this time because the supreme law of the Church is the salvation of souls as exhibited through works of charity and mercy. Please renew in your daily prayers the intentions for the sick, their caregivers, our first responders, and our ordained and lay ministers. With every good wish I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael F. Olson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Michael F. Olson, STD, MA
Bishop of Fort Worth