



DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS

Office of the Bishop

May 8, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

I know the desire to return to your parishes and receive the Eucharist is incredibly strong. These past few months have required a significant sacrifice, both on the part of the faithful, and that of our priests. Our clergy and parish staff desire to be close to you, especially during this difficult time. I am grateful for the way our priests have connected with their people. I am impressed with the innovative ways we have found to continue our efforts to evangelize. Amid this crisis, we have been reminded that our Catholic faith is not confined to a building or the hour we spend together at Mass each weekend. Faith is also found when we go out and welcome the stranger, the lonely, and the forgotten. It is in how we pray without ceasing even while attending to the cares of this world.

This holistic life of faith remains interwoven, of course, with our sacramental worship. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. Nothing could be more essential. Yet if this essential grace is to enable us to love God with all our hearts we must seek it out in a way that also enables us to love our neighbor. From the outset of this coronavirus pandemic, science has proven that in-person contact contributes greatly to the spread of the virus. This knowledge, together with input from public health officials, led me to the decision to suspend public Masses throughout the diocese. **This suspension of ALL public Masses and other liturgical and devotional services remains through May 28, 2020.** Although difficult, the suspension is necessary in order to limit the spread of the virus to protect the common good. Every single life lost to COVID-19 is precious. Each person was someone's loved one. This truth reminds us of the unique value of every person's life. Thus, we must continue to safeguard Christ's flock as we now seek prudent ways to restore opportunities for gathering for public worship.

Please know that the celebrations of certain sacraments have continued throughout our diocese through this difficult time. Pastors have used diocesan guidelines to determine how to safely offer sacraments to the faithful. Our churches have remained open for private prayer. Individual confessions, funerals, and anointing of the sick, with due respect for individual hospital policies, have never been prohibited. In recent weeks, permission for the celebration of infant baptisms and weddings has been expanded.

I have considered the advice of doctors in West Michigan, public health officials, and the diocesan staff in making these decisions throughout the pandemic. While we are not in the clear yet, I want to begin to consider what reopening our churches for public Masses may look like. The date on which public worship is restored will depend upon developments in public health guidance and our confidence that resuming public Masses will not pose an undue risk. We are called as Catholics to show concern for not only ourselves but for our brothers and sisters too. Reopening will proceed carefully and in phases. Public Masses will look and feel different than

before the pandemic. The diocese has provided detailed guidance to our pastors, so they may begin planning with their parish staffs and lay leadership teams. I wish to share some of that initial guidance with you. This guidance will be updated as we learn more.

- 1. Attendance will be limited.** When the “Stay Home, Stay Safe” order expires, businesses and public institutions will gradually begin reopening. The same will be true of our churches. The diocese is working with parishes to determine a safe attendance capacity and an equitable way to allow all parishioners to attend Mass in some capacity. With fewer people at each Mass, it may not be possible for you to attend with regularity for the first few weeks, or even to attend on Sunday. While the Lord’s Day remains our central day of worship, enabling limited participation in Mass and reception of Holy Communion is an important first step. If you have a flexible schedule, consider attending a Mass during the week to allow those with more limited options a similar opportunity to worship in community on the weekend. It is important that you consult your parish website, social media, or the online bulletin to stay engaged with your parish’s reopening plans.
- 2. Social distancing will be practiced.** Pews will be taped off to achieve proper social distancing. Individuals who are not members of the same household will need to be seated at least 6 feet away in all directions from other individuals. Specific instructions for how to maintain social distancing while approaching for and receiving Communion will be communicated by your parish.
- 3. Masks/Face coverings will be required.** All members of the faithful who are two years of age and older will need to bring and wear their own appropriate face covering to attend Mass. Liturgical ministers, who are in the sanctuary, will only wear face coverings while distributing Holy Communion. Holy Communion may not be received in the hand if you are wearing gloves.
- 4. Mass will look different.** Physical greetings will be omitted. The temporary suspension of the distribution of the Precious Blood remains in effect. Collection baskets will not be passed. You are encouraged to give to your parish online; parishes should also provide a common collection basket in which your envelope can be placed upon your arrival or departure from Mass.
- 5. Extra sanitization practices will be in place.** Ushers or a group of volunteers will be wiping down frequently touched surfaces between Masses. While hand sanitizer will be available for parishioners to use before and after Mass, you are encouraged to bring your own hand sanitizer.

All Catholics within the territory of the Diocese of Grand Rapids are granted a dispensation from their obligation of attending Sunday Mass through June 30. This dispensation remains for a few reasons. As your shepherd, I do this out of concern for our elderly parishioners and those with underlying health conditions, who are at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Due to attendance restrictions mentioned previously, it will not be possible for all people to attend Sunday Mass when churches first reopen. Though the dispensation remains, our obligation to keep holy the Lord’s Day is of utmost importance to our continued faith life. Mass will continue to be televised at 10 a.m. Sunday on FOX 17 and livestreamed on the diocesan website (grdiocese.org) and Facebook page (Diocese of Grand Rapids). Further resources for observing Sunday at home are available at <https://grdiocese.org/spiritual-resources-during-coronavirus/>.

As we await the determination of a reopening date, I encourage the practice of patience and humility as we approach this next phase. We want the reopening to be successful so that we do not have to suspend public Masses again. Working together, we can incrementally return to our beloved practice of the Catholic religion. However, if we skirt the regulations, we risk taking steps backward. Please continue to check the diocesan website: <http://bit.ly/GRdioceseCOVID19Updates> and social media for the latest information on our COVID-19 response.

I pray that we can gather again soon to celebrate our faith in community with one another. Until that time, let us pray for each other, for the sick and deceased, for their families, and for all frontline workers and officials who are working to protect us and restore our communities to good health. We entrust these prayers to the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes, patroness of those who suffer illness.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "D. J. Walkowiak", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

Most Reverend David J. Walkowiak
Bishop of Grand Rapids