



DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH
THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Pastoral Letter

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

April 29, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

As I have reminded you before during these past several weeks, the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. The Eucharist makes us the Church through communion with Christ and with each other as one body, brothers and sisters, and saves us from being an aggregate of individuals with selfish interests. In our vocation as the Church, we are to care for each other, especially the vulnerable, in the integrity of soul and body as created by God.

It is with being mindful of these and other truths of the Gospel that I am very happy to announce to you that this weekend, **May 2-3, 2020**, we will begin the public celebration of masses in the Diocese of Fort Worth. This is the start of a phased process that will require patience and generosity on our part. Parishes now are scheduling posted times for the sacrament of Penance as priests have been previously hearing confessions by appointment. Please consult your parish office for these times. All confessions will be celebrated in a manner that protects the safety of the penitent and the priest. It has been my ardent desire and that of each of our priests serving in the Diocese of Fort Worth to celebrate Mass with each of you, the assembly of the faithful gathered to worship God in sacrifice and sacrament as Christ intends. I list the following protocols for the sake of fundamental guidance and good order for a safe return to public Mass during this first phase of re-opening the State of Texas.

The current state of the pandemic is such that the faithful are still dispensed from the obligation to attend and to participate in Sunday Mass. There are still legitimate threats to our health from the highly contagious COVID-19 virus; these threats are especially critical for the elderly and for people with a compromised immune system because of other pre-existing conditions. If you are sick or exhibiting symptoms of any illness stay home. If you are over the age of 60, I am strongly encouraging you not to attend Mass. If your parish provides a Mass exclusively for people over the age of 60, I recommend that you attend that Mass. I am asking that people over 60 years of age not distribute Holy Communion.

Mindful of the obligation of charity to our neighbor, **I am requiring that people in attendance at Mass wear masks or scarfs over their mouths and nose inside the church to help prevent the spread of the virus.** This is not simply a recommendation. People will not be

THE CATHOLIC CENTER

seated without wearing a mask. We must err on the side of caution and of protecting those who are most vulnerable to the dangerous effects of COVID-19 out of an authentic love for our neighbor—a love that befits the selfless love of Christ extended to us in the gift of the Eucharist. If you do not desire to wear a mask for any reason, please stay home or follow the Mass by live-streaming in your car and receive Holy Communion when it is distributed safely, (with Ministers of Communion sanitizing their hands before distributing) in a designated area outside.

The number of people who are to be in attendance at Mass will be limited to a number that can be safely present within the guidelines set by the Governor and the CDC recommendations of social distancing of a MINIMUM OF SIX FEET between people. Couples and families may be seated together as they normally would, with six feet distance separating them from others seated in church. (A diagram of how seating should look is posted on the [diocesan website](#) accompanying this letter.) Upon entering church at the designated entrance, people, wearing masks or scarf coverings over their mouth and nose, will have their hands sanitized and be escorted by an usher to a seat in the church. Once the church building has reached capacity, people arriving cannot be admitted and will be invited to attend another Mass, or directed to a parish hall, if available, arranged for social distancing with live-streaming, or will be able to follow along in their cars by live-streaming and receive Holy Communion when offered outside in a designated area and with due regard for social distancing. At the end of Mass, people will be dismissed from their pews in an orderly fashion mindful of social distancing. Please do not linger and gather in groups. The procedure for distributing Holy Communion at an outside designated area will be unique to each parish but in accord with the protocols established in my pastoral letter of March 19, 2020. Check with your parish for specific instructions.

In the same sense of responsible charity, **I am asking that the venerable custom of receiving Holy Communion on the tongue not be done during this period of pandemic.** My reasoning for this is that the current expert opinion regarding the transmission of COVID-19 is that the virus is passed through small droplets in a person's breath received in close contact between people such as that of the hand of a minister of the Eucharist and a communicant's mouth. I realize that this is very difficult for many of us to consider because of our authentic piety in maintaining this venerable custom. I am asking you to be considerate in charity of your neighbor and receive Holy Communion in the hand for the time being.

The church building will be wiped down with disinfectant in between all masses. Hymnals and other worship aids are not to be present or used during Phase I. All other parish gatherings are still currently prohibited or limited to online communications for this first phase of re-opening Texas. Collection plates will not be passed or handled among people. Holy Communion will not be shared under both species (no reception of the chalice). There is to be no exchange of a handshake for the sign of peace. If possible, please do not forget to maintain your stewardship and to support your parish financially.

These same protocols and occupancy limitations apply in the Diocese of Fort Worth to the celebration of weddings, funerals, and baptisms for the sake of the safety and good health of all involved.

These protocols will be reassessed in two weeks as we continue to progress through each phase of re-opening Texas.

Finally, and most importantly, thank you for the extraordinary generosity that you have displayed in donating non-perishable food items and gift cards to your local parish that they can be distributed through food banks and other outreach services in our parishes and local communities. Please, if you are able, continue to do so and to remember Catholic Charities Fort Worth (CCFW) as the ordinary means of delivery for care and services to the poor and those who are most in need. There will be an ongoing and growing need for these works of mercy from the faithful throughout our path to recovery.

The past six weeks have been very difficult for many people throughout the twenty-eight counties of the Diocese of Fort Worth, the State of Texas, the United States of America, and throughout the world. For us as Christians and members of Christ's Catholic Church, these have also been times for the opportunity to come to a renewal of our faith through prayer and works of mercy. Thus, we are not returning to the way things were before this pandemic, instead we are moving forward ever closer to Christ and towards establishing the Kingdom of God in our community. I thank each and all of you for the sacrifices that you have made in contributing to the fulfillment of this holy endeavor. With every good wish and my pledge of prayers for you and for your families I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

+ Michael F. Olson

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



E. James Hart

Reverend Monsignor E. James Hart
Chancellor and Moderator of the Curia