

## Pastor's Notes: Planning for Public Masses

May 17, 2020

With hope, I write to you this week. This hope springs from the sun that is shining after all the many storms, and in a particular way, from the Bishop's recent Decree authorizing public Masses starting Pentecost weekend, May 30th-31st. I know many of you have been longing for the grace-filled experience of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the reception of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. This has truly been a great trial and source of hardship for many. However, I hope you have been able to also deepen your love of God through this longing in this time of separation. Just like we find grace on the Way of the Cross, so, too, God is allowing this present suffering to prepare us for an even greater moment of glory. That being said, the Bishop's Decree allowing for public Masses brings with it a series of prudent measures that will need to be kept in mind to protect the common good, with a desire to slow the spread of this disease that has been ravaging the world these past months.

Returning to the Sacraments will have to be done with great forethought and prudence, and for that I am grateful for the many collaborators and advisors in the parish who will assist me in implementing the Bishop's Decree at Sts. Peter and Paul. I'd like to share with you my process to develop the plan that we will follow here at the Basilica. First, I have asked the clergy of our parish (three priests and three deacons) to prayerfully consider what the Bishop has written, and we met last Saturday to take a first stab at the various issues involved. Having hammered out a first draft, I am presenting a proposal and variations for the Parish Pastoral Council to give input and advise me ahead of our Zoom meeting May 20th. As a result of that collaborative process, we hope to have a rollout of our plan by May 24th, which we will communicate via social media. Things that we will be looking at include access to the church, seating capacity, social distancing requirements, sanitation, personal protective equipment, the manner of distribution of Holy Communion, and even our Mass schedule. These are unprecedented times, and I ask your patience and understanding as we deal with this crisis with a spirit of prudence but also with supernatural faith that ultimately God is in control. I reiterate our duty to follow the prudential advice of legitimate authority, both ecclesial and civil, with the common good in mind.

I remind you of my previous presentation on a part of the Bishop's Decree that causes many consternation: namely, the prohibition of receiving Communion on the tongue. This measure is enacted with a mind to protect those vulnerable to the virus and again is a matter of conscience for the Bishop. It is for us, then, to seriously listen to and heed this ruling from proper ecclesial authority to whom we are subject. However, there should be no compulsion to receive Holy Communion in a way contrary to the dictates of one's individual conscience, and no minister of Holy Communion can force a communicant to receive Holy Communion in the hand against his will. Thus, if your own conscience is disturbed by this ordinance of the Bishop to the point of not wishing to receive Holy Communion on the hand, I would recommend to you the pious and traditional practice of a Spiritual Communion until such time as this ordinance is lifted. No one who presents himself to me for Holy Communion will be denied Holy Communion.

I remind you that with this Decree, the Bishop has extended the dispensation from the obligation of attendance at Sunday Mass. In other words, no one is required, at this time, to attend Mass, until that dispensation is lifted at the end of coronavirus crisis. Each person who makes the personal decision to come to Mass—and even the further and distinct decision to approach the rail for Holy Communion—makes a conscious decision to enter an environment that is not as pristine as remaining at home, just as much as they do when they engage in shopping trips to the supermarket or in other places of business. If you wouldn't stand in line at the grocery store, you should not stand in the Communion line nor approach the rail at Communion. With the Bishop's dispensation, this decision is left to the individual conscience of the believer. I urge you to consider all factors, but to also make your decision based on faith in God's providence, trust in the prudent measures that have been taken, and with a heart set on things above. Two people making that decision based on these same principles may come to very different conclusions. For instance, one may trust in God's Providence that His grace will be sufficient by making a spiritual communion, and that staying at home is the prudent measure that they must respect for their own well-being and that of their loved ones, and that they do this in the hope of heaven and the spiritual goods that God would provide to help them get there. Another may discern that even if he contracts the disease or inadvertently passes it to another, it would be a part of God's Providence, that God permits things like disease and even death for a greater purpose, just like He shows us in Jesus' Way of the Cross and in every martyr's death. Coupled with the prudent measures of sanitizing and wearing personal protective equipment, he may make the choice to come to Mass. Those who prudently and sacrificially forego Holy Communion, especially for the sake of others, like the elderly or vulnerable with whom they may come into contact, can be consoled by the graces to be found in making a spiritual act of communion.

On the part of the clergy, I present the example of Fr. Patrick Ryan, Servant of God, a martyr of charity, whose selfless sacrifice during the 1878 epidemic gives us a model for discernment. We priests and deacons, knowing that in such an intimate occasion as Holy Communion there is no way to prevent all human contact, will nevertheless be willingly and cheerfully taking this risk for the higher aim of salvation of souls, which is our supreme law. We will be discussing how best to prudently minimize the risks to ourselves and to others, and this will be communicated to all in due time. I ask for you as parishioners to pray for the priests, deacons, and members of the Parish Pastoral Council, as we discern the best manner to apply the Bishop's directives here at Sts. Peter and Paul. Remember that it will not be the ideal that perhaps we have in mind, and that it will not answer everyone's desire. Many will still be very uncomfortable, one way or the other. These are indeed trying times, and we can only do the best that we can with the information that we have. Please join me in praying for a trust in Divine Providence and an end to this current pandemic.

