



ARCHDIOCESE OF AGANA

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Archbishop's message on lifting of dispensation on Pentecost Sunday

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ:

Happy birthday Church!

In a few short days, we will be able to say those words to one another. It is my prayer that there will be a great many more people exclaiming those words of joy within the actual walls of our churches.

The Church will celebrate Pentecost Sunday this weekend on May 23. The feast of Pentecost commemorates that great moment when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles in a powerful rush of wind, with tongues of fire that transformed everyone present.

Filled with the Holy Spirit and speaking to one another in languages that defied their understanding, the disciples who gathered in the upper room were infused with graces during what we know was the beginning of our Catholic Church. Pentecost marks the inauguration of our Catholic Church and is thus considered the birthday of the Church.

The miracle that occurred with the disciples in that room is the miracle that brings us together each Sunday and for some, every day. The gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed on the disciples in that moment are gifts that continue to be bestowed on us today. It is why we gather regularly inside the Dulce Nombre de Maria Cathedral-Basilica, in every Catholic church on island, in the Marianas Islands, the Pacific region and in fact across the vastness of the world.

As baptized children of God, we come together to celebrate the Blessed Sacrament made present to us in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. We partake in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. We receive the real Body and Blood of Jesus Christ and thus are strengthened in our calling to go out and proclaim the Gospel to every creature on earth.

While on earth, now Saint John Paul the Great said, *“The Lord unites us with Himself through the Eucharist—Sacrament and Sacrifice—and He unites us with Himself and with one another by a bond stronger than any natural union. Thus united, He sends us into the whole world to bear witness, through faith and works, to God’s love, preparing the coming of His Kingdom and anticipating it, though in the obscurity of the present time.”*

We call the celebration and sacrifice of the Mass the source and summit of our Catholic faith. However, for a period of time more than a year ago, our reception of the sacred Body and Blood of Christ suddenly became endangered in the Archdiocese of Agaña. As a startling, life-taking virus descended upon our island and in most parts of the world, the doors of our churches closed, celebration of Masses inside our actual churches ceased for a time and many could not receive Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

It was necessary for me to grant to all Guam Catholics a general dispensation from the regular obligation of attending Mass on Sundays and other Holy Days of Obligation. Though it was not a pleasant decision to announce, the dispensation was necessary for the health and safety of all the faithful.

Though not completely free of the dangers that the virus poses to all people, it is evident that our community has since made great strides in the protection from, prevention and mitigation of the virus known as COVID-19. I therefore announce that as of Pentecost Sunday, May 23, I am lifting the general dispensation from attending Mass for all Catholics. Everyone should be made aware that as in ordinary times, all Catholics must now resume fulfilling their obligation to participate in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass on Sundays and on Holy Days of Obligation.

Exceptions in the form of particular dispensations are given to the faithful who are ill, have fragile health, are homebound or susceptible to contracting illnesses. With mercy, our Church must always keep in mind the health and protection of our vulnerable brothers and sisters in any action or decisions that we make.

Consideration is also given to our brothers and sisters who have tremendous anxiety or fear of becoming sick from being in a public setting. In these cases, they are also dispensed from their obligation to attend Mass. For those uncertain about their status in relation to the lifting of the dispensation, please speak to your respective pastor or parish priest for guidance.

Each pastor will be responsible for accommodating the return of more faithful to their actual churches starting this Pentecost Sunday. In certain parishes, livestreaming of the Mass may be reduced in number or cease altogether. However, though it remains at the discretion of individual pastors, I highly encourage all parishes to consider continuing to livestream some of your Masses to the homebound, sick and elderly. Restricted to their homes or senior care facilities, your broadcasts are like lifelines to them.

The lifting of the general dispensation does not mean ceasing other Archdiocesan protocols that are meant to minimize the spread of the virus, such as wearing of protective masks, sanitizing of hands, sanitizing of pews, signing in at the entrances, and maintaining proper spacing between Massgoers. These will continue.

The dispensation that was granted during the start of the pandemic was understood to be temporary. Following Mass through Internet livestreaming or by way of TV or radio broadcasts is never a substitute for attending Mass live and in person. It can never replace being fully present ourselves as we celebrate the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. We pray to our Lord that we never have to resume such conditions again.

I spoke earlier of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that the disciples received on Pentecost. They were transformed with courage and the Holy Spirit itself as they received their mission to proclaim Jesus Christ to all the world.

Pentecost is a good time for each of us to pause and reflect on everything that we've experienced during this extraordinary time of the pandemic. Contemplate the gifts that Jesus has given to each of us. Are we making the best use of those gifts? Are we fulfilling our duty to proclaim the Gospel to the world? What difference has Jesus made in your life? How are you sharing him with others?

I called ours the Pandemic Generation during my homily last Sunday, on the Seventh Sunday of Easter and the Ascension of the Lord. What purpose does God have for us at this time? What are the fruits we derive even from these difficult times? Having experienced the emptiness and loss of not being able to receive Jesus inside our churches, perhaps it has taken this life-changing global threat to better appreciate the beauty and importance of Mass and receiving the Holy Eucharist.

There have been graces. I have seen our parishes become more attentive to individual parishioners for instance, as they spend great care and attention to keeping their churches clean and sanitized and the parishioners well protected. I have witnessed the sacrifices and love that students, families, teachers, staff and administrators have devoted to their schools as they diligently make the adjustments necessary to keep Catholic education thriving at their sites.

Our Catholic churches and schools have developed prowess in the use of technology to regularly livestream Masses and events to their communities and global audiences. They are able to do so because of big-hearted volunteers and staffers with communication skills who give an extra part of themselves operating the cameras and other machines.

To each of you who have contributed to our Church in these and other ways, I express my sincerest gratitude. Thank you as well to all Catholics who have endured these difficult times and have remained supportive.

To one and all, please come back to the Church! Our doors are open. Most important of all, Jesus Christ has never left. He welcomes you!

Yours in Jesus Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael J. Byrnes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "M".

Most Rev. Michael Byrnes, S.T.D.
Metropolitan Archbishop of Agaña