

Catholic Diocese of Columbus

May 13, 2020

Dear Friends,

With the anticipation of reestablishing public worship, we must do so in a way that does not irresponsibly place the health of our people in grave danger. We are still learning a lot about the COVID-19 Coronavirus, we have seen its tragic force in the death of so many people. We pray for all those who have died these months as well as for those who mourn. We have also seen heroic efforts by those particularly in the health care field but so many others who in invisible ways have provided for our needs. We are all united in sincere gratitude for the work and the sacrifices of these people.

We also pray for and give thanks for those who have prudently guided us through these difficult times at the national, state, and local levels. In particular, we are grateful for the respect, which the state of Ohio has shown, for our religious rights and liberties. At no point have they disparaged our essential right and duty to worship Almighty God at the sacrifice of the Mass on Sunday and encounter the Risen Lord in the Eucharist. Rather, partnering with our brothers and sisters in the civil order, we prudently decided that though divine worship is an essential activity so also is the protection of the common good and the dignity of human life. The medical and public safety officials have been warning us urgently that gathered assemblies of persons was gravely dangerous to the individuals present and to the common good. Faced with these dangers, we have exercised together our moral responsibility to safeguard human life and to allow the local healthcare systems to manage the care of the sick. This prudential judgment on our part required great sacrifice for all in the Church. You have also sacrificed in various ways these days. For us, as Catholics, the loss of our Sunday gathering for worship is a great sacrifice. You have made these sacrifices in a spirit of extreme charity and I am deeply grateful. These measures we have undertaken together, we are advised, have made a difference. Our plans for reopening need therefore, to respect all those sacrifices in a way that is responsible with care for the well-being of individuals and of the wider community.

As one public official told me, the COVID-19 Coronavirus will be with us for a long time and we need to learn how to live with it. Many of the dangers of gathered assemblies remain. The measures proposed in our guidelines and the work that is being done at the parish level will help to mitigate those dangers to some degree. Cognizant of your many sacrifices, I need to ask patience and flexibility as we begin this process of the return to public worship.

This week some churches are beginning to open for individual prayer. The hours will be limited and subject to the necessities of social distancing. Meanwhile Confessions continue to be available by appointment. During the week of May 25, 2020, some churches will begin to celebrate Weekday Mass publicly under limited circumstances as the Churches are ready.

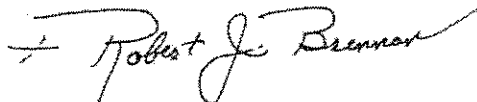
On the weekend of the great Solemnity of Pentecost, May 30/31, 2020, most of our churches will begin the public celebration of Sunday Mass. Please note, many things to which we are accustomed will be different. Schedules will need to be modified for a variety of reasons. Not every Church will be prepared, and some parishes may need to work together. As a matter of fact, since the fall we have been looking at ways that we might need to adjust schedules so that priests and parishes might work together and, in some cases, we may need to do so right away. We also need to leave time to disinfect the churches and we may need to change locations to accommodate some of the larger populations. Parishes are not in competition but rather meeting the individual needs using the guidelines we are implanting. I thank you in advance for your understanding.

All Catholics in the Diocese of Columbus are dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass at least through September 13, 2020. Please, if you have any concerns, do not come at this point. In fact, I encourage all to follow the public guidelines here in Ohio as much as possible. If you are in one or more of the "high risk" categories, it is still too early to come out. And, of course, if you are experiencing any signs of illness, you have a serious obligation to stay at home. Given that the obligation is dispensed, individuals who wish to participate at Mass and receive Holy Communion might consider coming at a less crowded time, perhaps during the week. The Cathedral will continue to broadcast Mass each day on St. Gabriel Radio and to stream via our diocesan YouTube channel as will many of our parishes.

We will need to be flexible with last minute changes to schedules, and further changes may be necessary even after we begin. Out of care for you, the priest is subject to the same obligation not to offer Mass if he is showing even the slightest signs of not feeling well. No one is required to receive Holy Communion and the reception of Holy Communion on the hand is strongly encouraged. Please be respectful of the guidelines for social distancing and please understand that when the Church has reached capacity allowed for health and safety reasons, we cannot admit any more people under any circumstance.

Please take the time to read carefully the accompanying guidelines. And most of all, please pray. Pray for me, for your parish priests and the teams with whom they are working to prepare for the return to public worship. These days the Gospels take us spiritually to the table of Jesus with his Apostles on the night of the Last Supper. Reading these chapters little by little (John chapters 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17) might be a good spiritual preparation. And know that I pray for you with gratitude every day.

Our Lady of Fatima, pray for us.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert J. Brennan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Robert J. Brennan
Bishop of Columbus