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A Pastoral Message from Bishop Tobin

“The State of the Church in the Diocese of Providence in the Age of Coronavirus”

April 19, 2020

Divine Mercy Sunday

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Without a doubt, the coronavirus pandemic has caused enormous challenges, changes and concerns for our world, our nation, our state and our Church. One of the primary difficulties is the uncertainty about the future: when will it all end, will the world be different, how will it affect my life, and what will the Church look like in the days to come? On a local level this uncertainty, these changes, are relevant for the Diocese of Providence too.

The purpose of this reflection is not to provide answers to all of these questions – for I don’t have the answers either – but to collect and summarize some of the questions that will come our way in the days to come. And please note that this is not intended to be a comprehensive, all-inclusive list of questions and issues, but rather, some random observations and somewhat personal reflections. And I’ve attempted to organize them in three broad categories: 1) Worship and the Sacraments; 2) Financial Questions; and 3) the Need for Evangelization and Outreach. And then I’ll conclude with some personal thoughts.

Worship and the Sacraments

The area that has had the most immediate impact on the life of the Church is the suspension of public liturgies and devotions, and the very limited public access to our churches. It broke my heart when we were obliged to suspend all public worship and to severely limit access to our church buildings. The pain of this moment was heightened by the approaching celebration of Holy Week and Easter which is so important for us, so central to our faith.

From the very beginning, and throughout this crisis, I made a conscious decision to be a “good citizen” and to cooperate with public officials in every way possible, primarily because of our mutual and serious obligation to protect the health and safety of our fellow citizens in ways determined by health experts. Some have asked why I haven’t been more outspoken and defiant in responding to the restrictions imposed upon us. But even though I had some very serious personal reservations about some of the things we were asked to do, I didn’t want to be a confrontational, divisive voice during this time of crisis. I felt the heavy responsibility of setting a good example for others. There has been some consolation in the fact that these restrictions have been experienced by the Church throughout our nation and around the globe, including the venerable Vatican itself.

Although it seems that we are rounding the curve and a good part of the crisis is behind us, still there is uncertainty about the future. When will we be able to return to our churches and celebrate Holy Mass and the sacraments together again? Will there be restrictions on the number of people who can gather? What safety precautions will be needed? What about the celebration of funerals and weddings? Simply put, at this point, we don’t have the answer to all of these questions.

It is my fond hope, my prayer, my “aspiration,” that by May 31st, the Solemnity of Pentecost, we will be able to gather in our churches again, even with a limited number of worshippers if necessary, for the public celebration of Holy Mass and to invoke the healing grace of the Holy Spirit. For, as Saint Pope Paul VI memorably said, *“The Church needs her perennial Pentecost. She needs fire in her heart, words on her lips, and prophecy in her outlook. She needs to be the Temple of the Holy Spirit.”*

It seems likely that the large scale, festive celebrations of Confirmations and First Holy Communions will have to be deferred until a later time. I hope that the baptism of catechumens and the reception into the Church of other candidates, normally held at the Easter Vigil, can be carried out in the very near future. It’s very important that we not interrupt, for even a single minute more than necessary, the journey of faith that our catechumens and candidates have traveled.

The Diocese of Providence had Ordinations for the Priesthood and the Diaconate scheduled for this spring. Although this is subject to change, we hope to ordain our one candidate for the priesthood in June as previously scheduled, in a very small, limited ceremony, not open to the public. The Ordination of two deacon candidates has been rescheduled for early fall.

I take this opportunity to express my great admiration and appreciation to our priests for their initiative and creativity in reaching out to and staying in contact with their

parishioners, patients and students during this very unusual time. *Well done, good and faithful servants!*

We are proud that the Diocese of Providence has been in the forefront of responding to this historic crisis, with the courageous ministry of chaplains, a wide variety of helpful social services, spiritual support, and a multitude of prayers and blessings for all those touched by this horrific virus. And in particular we wish to renew our prayers for those who have died, those who are ill, their families and caregivers, those painfully separated from their loved ones, and the many folks who are out of work and school. May God give healing, comfort and peace to his people!

Financial Questions

It is abundantly clear that the coronavirus crisis has had and will have a devastating impact on the financial health of the Local Church – for the diocese and its related organizations, and for our parishes and schools. But here again, there are more questions than answers. We know that the Church in the Diocese of Providence will not be exactly the same after the crisis as it was before.

In meeting with diocesan staff, I am told that there is some good and reassuring news on this front. There are many reports that our parishioners continue to support their local churches with contributions they've sent to the parish and with on-line donations. The Catholic Charity Appeal, while severely crippled by the shutdown, is still producing some income and even now is being used to provide assistance to those with pressing needs. Also, we plan on doing interim mailings and a more significant outreach for the CCA in the early fall. The redemption of pledges to the "Grateful for God's Providence Capital Campaign" is continuing and encouraging. And finally, the infusion of federal money to various church entities – the diocese, parishes, schools, and nursing homes – has been and will be extremely helpful. It's important to remember, though, that this is a specific initiative and will not address our long term challenges.

There are many questions about those challenges and how we will respond to ensure the financial stability (and viability) of the institutional Church. Will some parishes and schools have to close? Will major capital projects have to be deferred? Will some popular programs be reduced or eliminated? Will there be a reduction in work force, a freeze in new hiring, a change in the work-week schedule, a reduction in salaries? Will we have to sell property, establish new lines of credits and borrow significantly? It's very important to note that none of these measures have been determined, but all of them could be on the table going forward. And as usual, there will be considerable consultation before final decisions are made and implemented. But it's safe to presume that everyone

in the Diocese of Providence will be affected by the coming temporal and financial changes in one way or another.

Some of the financial challenges will possibly be temporary, and we expect to return to a more stable, healthy financial condition in the near future. We will have to be very prudent stewards of our limited resources, and I am confident that we can count on the outstanding generosity of our faithful going forward. But in asking for support, we must recognize and respect the grave financial challenges and obligations that many of our own people are facing – unemployment, reduction of income, new bills, and their primary obligation to support their families.

The Need for Evangelization and Outreach

The advent of a “new normal” will present both challenges and opportunities for the Church. And many questions.

When our churches re-open for public worship, how will the faithful respond? Will they be eager to join with others for Mass, or, because of lingering concerns about health, will they stay away? Have some of our people been alienated by the closure of our churches and the feeling that the Church “abandoned them” in their time of need? Will they have grown accustomed to watching the Mass on TV or online, and find that it’s not necessary to attend in person, or will they have missed the sense of community, their parish family, and realize that “virtual participation” can never replace the grace of being personally present?

This time of quarantine and social distancing has no doubt been a humbling experience for all of us. I wonder if it has also purified us. We’ve grown accustomed to wearing masks in public, but I wonder if the experience has also unmasked our rather casual complacency. Has it challenged our smug presumption that the Church and the sacraments will always be there for us? Has it reordered our priorities and re-awakened our thirst for God, the God *“in whom we live and move and have our being?”*

These are important questions that we will encounter going forward, but our return to “normal” also presents a splendid opportunity for us. First, in the light of what we have experienced, it invites each of us to a profound commitment to personal spiritual renewal, an honest examination of conscience, for authentic evangelization begins there. Questions you and I need to ask ourselves: Am I praying every day; am I faithfully receiving the sacraments; am I living a moral life; am I supportive of the work of the Church; am I trying to grow in the imitation of Christ every day; do I have my *“eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12: 2)?*

I'm convinced that as a Church community – in the diocese, in our parishes, schools and organizations – this post-crisis moment invites us to redouble our commitment to evangelization. We have a new opportunity to reach out to and welcome back our own faithful Catholics whom we've desperately missed, as well as Catholics who have drifted away, (especially so many younger adults), those who have been alienated from the Church for any reason, and those who have never been members of the Church.

We should be emboldened to employ every legitimate strategy and tactic we can think of: door-to-door visits, parish receptions, continuing education, Sunday bulletins, public advertising, and social media. We can enlist our parish organizations, senior citizens, young adults and youth groups to assist in this task. But while we want to grow the Church, an increase in numbers isn't the final goal. This moment in history is a new opportunity to appreciate the goodness, truth and beauty of our Catholic Faith, and to share with others the blessings that have been ours.

Here I echo the words of Pope Francis who wrote: *“The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus . . . I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ . . . No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.” (Evangelii Gaudium)*

In short, let's resolve to turn the coronavirus crisis into a moment of purification, rebirth and renewal for the entire Church. It's something we should start talking about and planning for right now.

Some Personal Thoughts

Like many of you I've run the gamut of emotions during this crisis. At various times I've been irritated, anxious, and angry. I've complained to God and I've wondered if he's sending a message to mankind with this pandemic, if there's a hidden meaning to all of this. But I need to remember God's rebuke to Job, the beleaguered figure of the Old Testament, when Job questioned the suffering he was going through: *“Who is this that obscures divine plans with words of ignorance . . . Will we have arguing with the Almighty by the critic? Let him who would correct God give answer.” (Job 38: 2; 40: 2)* It's difficult to understand and accept God's purpose and plan in all of this, isn't it? *“Oh, the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!” (Rom 11: 33)*

But through it all, dear brothers and sisters, I've been so edified and encouraged by you, members of the Church in the Diocese of Providence – priests, deacons, religious and lay faithful. You have been patient, prudent, prayerful and supportive. You have given

good example and have helped lead our whole community out of this time of crisis, out of this valley of tears.

And with you I am now looking to and focusing on the future. I look forward to the end of the dire daily briefings with the litany of macabre statistics; to the end of wearing the face masks that make us look and feel silly; to being able to cross the state line without the fear of being forced into quarantine; and to removing the need to stay six feet apart from other human beings.

And in a positive way, I'm looking forward to being with co-workers at the office once again; to the routine of daily mail and meetings at the office; to the normal morning traffic jams on 195 W; to the possibility of traveling to Pittsburgh to visit ailing family members; to watching the Red Sox on TV and, last but not least . . . seeing Tom Brady take the field in a Tampa Bay uniform.

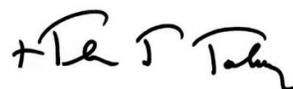
But most of all I'm looking forward to that day when our Church family will be reunited so that the normal, daily, essential work of the Church can resume. I look forward to being with you once again for pastoral visits, Holy Mass, the celebration of the sacraments, and special parish and school events. And, pray God, that day will come very, very soon!

To conclude these reflections, I repeat the words of my Easter Sunday homily: *"We don't know the details of the future, but we know that our lives will not end in emptiness and frustration . . . Because we have hope, we live differently. Because of our hope, we will learn from the past, and will embrace the future with renewed confidence and a joyful, invincible spirit."*

Dear friends, as we move into the future we know that Jesus will accompany us every step of the way, and we know that with the intercession of our dear Blessed Mother, Our Lady of Providence, God will bless the Church in the Diocese of Providence with a renewed spirit, with renewed faith, hope and love as we accept, embrace and seek to follow his Divine Will in all that we do.

May God bless you and keep you, and please pray for me.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas J. Tobin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "J".

Thomas J. Tobin
Bishop of Providence