

COVID-19 update: How we move forward

Dear Friends,

St. John Paul was known to have said on occasion during his pontificate that suffering releases love. Indeed, the love and Christian charity I have witnessed over and over in central Ohio since arriving here last March has been evident beyond all expectations in these last months. I want to begin by thanking you most sincerely for everything you have done and all you have carried in these unprecedented days. Since writing to you in May, we have been focusing on the return to public worship taking all the measures, individually and collectively, to safeguard the health and safety of all. I asked pastors to make whatever adjustments were necessary to allow for a smooth return while remaining vigilant. In the following weeks, we have all worked hard together to make the experience of gathering for the celebration of the Sacred Liturgy welcoming, prayerful and reverent. This has been our first and greatest priority. Allow me publicly to thank and congratulate not only our priests and deacons but, really, all of our parish teams and volunteers who have extended themselves in so many ways.

The experience of being together these last three months has taught us a lot. Reflecting on these can guide us moving forward:

The Importance of Mass and Holy Communion. Perhaps the most important lesson through the experience of the suspension and return of the public celebration of Holy Mass is just how important it is to our lives as Catholics. I will always grieve the necessity of having to take the steps I did for the protection of both individuals and the community. You have inspired me not only by your generous and painful sacrifice but by your joy at being able to return to Mass and approach the Lord in the Sacred Eucharist. You stayed connected through the broadcast of Mass through different media from your own parishes, the Cathedral and other locations. I am glad that this was a help to you especially as you faithfully kept Sunday as the Day of the Lord. But we all appreciate more than ever the need to gather around the banquet of the Lord and join ourselves to the Sacrifice of Christ with “full, conscious, and active participation” in the Sacred Liturgy. (From “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy” at the Second Vatican Council, 14.)

The Virus is here for the long haul. Since we have returned at the end of May, we have seen some spikes in the occurrence of the COVID-19 coronavirus, and while those are going down, we will probably see numbers rise and fall during the foreseeable future. With greater testing and the terrific response of the medical field, we are in a much better position than we were in March. It is also clear that the measures we took early on and our current practices of social distancing, the wearing of face coverings such as masks, and deliberate washing and sanitizing, have been and continue to be effective in mitigating the spread. It is good that we can resume so many aspects of our daily lives even with limitations and vigilance. **Because it remains dangerous for a good number of people to gather in public, the dispensation from the Sunday Mass obligation has been extended indefinitely in the Diocese of Columbus as in the other dioceses in Ohio.** Likewise, the Cathedral and many parishes will continue to broadcast Masses to connect with those who are yet unable to return. There are a variety of reasons individuals and families may not be ready to assemble for Mass or in other public gatherings for that matter. Some of these involve their own health or that of others with whom they come in contact, the need to limit contact because of work obligations, and many other personal concerns. It is important to stress in the strongest terms that anyone not feeling well – regardless of whether they believe they have the virus or not – should not come to Mass in charity to others. We need to exercise an overabundance of caution in this respect. This brings me to a delicate balance. If you are well, and if it is possible, I want you to feel welcome at Mass for the reasons stated earlier. Some tell me that they seek to attend Mass one day during the week when the crowds are smaller and the time spent inside the church is a little shorter than on a typical Sunday.

Beginning this new phase of our reopening, we can unify our practices. The initial return required latitude and accommodations in some of our practices particularly around the distribution of Holy Communion. We are in the process of returning to normal practices at this point. The Sign of Peace and the distribution of the Precious Blood from the chalice will continue to be omitted. While pastors will always try to meet particular needs when possible, the distribution of Holy Communion should ordinarily take place in the context of Mass. We need always to avoid the impression of the reception of Holy Communion as something to be “gotten” and with true reverence and devotion as the culmination of participating

in the offering of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. I know that it is true love that draws you to the Eucharist, but it is important that the Church practice great care in the connection of the Eucharist to the celebration of Mass.

Parishes will continue to provide time for prayer in the church and for Exposition and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Because extended or perpetual adoration requires commitments that individuals might not be able to make, schedules may need to be changed.

Our Catholic Schools have been working all summer to provide as normal an experience as possible for the opening of the new school year, taking all the measures and precautions (such as providing for social distancing, aggressive sanitizing of the facilities, and the requirement of wearing facial coverings such as masks) necessary to provide for the health and safety of students, teachers and staff. We believe that the return to school is in the best interest of our students and is consistent with the unique mission of Catholic schools. This will look different in each school. Various models are in place at each school to adapt to the changing conditions. Plans have been communicated to the families and in many cases options are available for parents to choose. I am enormously grateful to our parents, teachers and administrators for their work and commitment.

Parish Schools of Religion (PSR) and other ministries, for the most part, will return in a virtual or hybrid format. Many parishes will take a family approach. Part of the reason for this is that children in school become part of a particular group in their classroom, presuming they are maintaining distance from others outside the school or the nuclear family. Gathering weekly for PSR brings children together from different areas into a new group. PSR is no less important than Catholic Schools, though they are structured differently. Along with other practical considerations, we need to look at other ways of catechesis and disciple formation for our young people and families, supporting parents in their role as primary educators of their children. Along the same lines, RCIA, sacramental preparation and youth ministry will likely have to take on virtual and hybrid formats. Pastors, catechetical leaders and youth ministers have been engaged with diocesan offices and Franciscan University of Steubenville to consider new models. Allow me to thank all our catechetical leaders and parish ministers for all their dedication and hard work.

Confirmations are in the process of being rescheduled. It was my hope that by now I would have been in the process of celebrating rescheduled Confirmations postponed from the spring and looking forward to the fall schedule. I miss visiting the parishes. The reality is that we are still living with the COVID-19 coronavirus and the very nature of Confirmation requires close personal contact. My concern is that in order to make up for past postponements, I would need to schedule multiple sessions each week. While I am more than willing to do so, the last thing I want is unknowingly to carry the virus, thus spreading it from one parish to another. It is better, therefore, that I delegate to pastors and parish priests to confirm children who were scheduled to be confirmed in 2020. Thanking you for your patience thus far, I ask your continued patience as parishes will need to schedule these in small groups over a period of time. All these considerations are for the well-being of the young people being confirmed.

Other parts of parish life and use of parish facilities may continue to need to be limited. The highest priority is the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. After that would be the schools and catechetical formation. While there are many elements of life that make our parishes strong and vibrant, we will need to adapt to what is possible given space and taking the highest care for health and safety.

In these days, I have been struck by the goodness of the people of this diocese. Overwhelmingly, people have been good and generous, taking care for the well-being of one another and finding creative ways to “gather” for prayer and mutual support. I cannot thank you enough. In that same spirit of generosity, let us be united in prayer particularly for those who have died in these months and for those who are currently ill or suffering the many different effects of this pandemic. Know that you are, every day, close to me in prayer and that I humbly acknowledge and appreciate my need of your prayers that I may serve you well. May the Lord in His mercy help and guide us all.