

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Come Holy Spirit! Just like the Apostles gathered in the Upper Room on that first Pentecost, we prayed this past weekend with expectant faith for the coming of the Holy Spirit to renew the Church and the face of the earth once again!

Gratefully, as you likely heard, the Governor last Friday announced that health officials have green lighted the incremental lift of restrictions in our state and, as part of that, we will be able to safely gather in our churches again beginning on June 12. The clergy of the diocese, along with the good staff who assist them, look forward to welcoming those of you who are able back home to your churches that weekend, when we will appropriately celebrate the true presence of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, on the feast of Corpus Christi. What better way to return to the celebration of in-person public Masses in our churches, to be in His presence, as we celebrate His true presence?

To prepare us for these next steps, guidance was issued to all pastors on May 26 to assist them in their role of facilitating the process of the restoration of Masses with a congregation. These guidelines will need to be made particular for each of our parishes. The way in which your parish might gather for Mass may be a bit slightly different than others, even neighboring parishes. As pastors are in the best position to understand the needs and practices of their own parish communities, it will ultimately be up to the pastor to finalize the specific plans for the parish he leads.

The restoration of Masses with a congregation will be completed in a phased approach, beginning first with the celebration of weekday Masses with a limited number of people (10 or less people present), then in Phase 2 with the celebration of Sunday Masses (with only a percentage of the church being used) with more than 10 people at daily Mass present. Infectious disease experts from St. Peter's Hospital helped to develop our procedures for the resumption of communion distribution. In the future, as the general health situation continues to improve, Phase 3 will allow for the celebration of weekday and Sunday Masses with an increased number of people present; somewhat relaxed physical distancing; use of masks and specified procedures for the distribution of Holy Communion. Phase 4 will allow for the celebration of weekday and Sunday Masses with an additional increased number of people present; additional relaxation in physical distancing, use of masks as optional and relaxed procedures for the distribution of Holy Communion. As we await further guidance from health officials, there is no firm date set for each phase. We are in Phase 1 now, and will begin Phase 2 on June 12.

As we work to restore Masses with a congregation, we will do so with the safety of all parishioners, clergy, religious, parish staff, and lay ministers in mind. Therefore, following the guidance of health officials, high use areas within the church will be wiped down with disinfectant before and after each liturgy; restroom facilities will be sanitized after each liturgy and regularly; all hymnals and missalettes (and other items) will be removed from the pews and stored for the duration of the pandemic. Singing will be limited. In addition, the faithful are encouraged to wash their hands at home and bring their own masks and hand sanitizer, which should be used upon entering the church. Face masks are expected to be worn by all except for the very young (parents are in best position to determine if their child is capable of wearing a mask).

Out of deep respect for human life and concern for the common good, those in vulnerable groups should stay home and those who are sick or symptomatic must stay home. Priests who do not feel well will not be able to celebrate Mass. Depending on how many people come to Masses, with social distancing, Mass schedules may need to be adjusted. Pastors will have to keep their parishioners informed of changes.

Understanding that every individual has their own concerns or is not able to return to Mass in-person, I am continuing to dispense all Catholics in our diocese from the obligation to attend Mass until further

notice. No one will be required to physically attend Mass during this period of time. While the obligation to attend Mass is dispensed, I encourage you to keep the Lord's Day holy by some other means. For example, I encourage you to tune into a livestreamed Mass from a local parish within our diocese (www.diometuchen.org/parish-live-streams) or on TV. You can also pray the Liturgy of the Hours, read and reflect on Sacred Scripture, and pray the rosary or some other devotion.

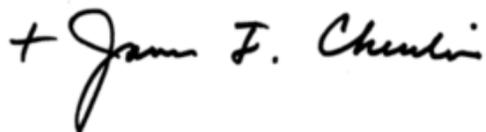
Finally, I want to express my deep gratitude for your faithfulness and perseverance in these past weeks. I am edified by the reports I get from our pastors and others about the creative ways that so many have sought to remain "connected" to the life of the Church. Please know that each day I carry you in my heart, my prayers and daily work. It is your physical safety, health and spiritual well-being that are my constant concern. As we look forward to gathering for public worship again, we have much to be thankful for and many concerns to pray and reflect upon. In addition to the scars of the pandemic, now the social landscape of our country is very tenuous; violence and unrest seems to be everywhere on the news. The Christ we follow as missionary disciples calls us to be ambassadors of a "peace the world cannot give." Our nation will find its peace only by turning wholeheartedly to the God of love. May our parishes and schools of Metuchen be places of light, helping to transform fear and anxiety into hope and confidence in God. May we be the instruments of His peace, justice and love wherever we find our life journey right now.

One day soon, I hope to be back at your parish again. I miss you! It is my joy to be your shepherd here in the Church of Metuchen; this is a gifted and wonderful spot in God's Kingdom on earth. I count on your prayers and support to fulfill my mission. May Mary, Mother of the Church, intercede for us, protect us and lead us safely to Her Son.

I am grateful to you for your patience in these past few months and assure you that with each day that has passed, I have prayed for you and your families, for your safety and health. I prayed too for the day I would be able to write you and tell you of our joyous return to the public in-person celebration of the Mass. So, know that I miss you and I am praying for you. With renewed confidence in His Holy Spirit, I ask that you please pray for me too as we take these next steps forward in faith, completely listening to Him and trusting in Him, who is always for us and with us! We are facing so many challenges in our world at this time and we need more prayer as we work together on a road forward as we face this worldwide pandemic and for peace and justice in our country.

With renewed best wishes, I remain

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ James F. Checchio". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend James F. Checchio, JCD, MBA
Bishop of Metuchen