



Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama

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Office of the Bishop

March 17, 2020
Saint Patrick

Dear Faithful People of the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama:

As you know, there are now many confirmed cases of the COVID-19 virus in the State of Alabama. The various civil authorities have, as of this writing, restricted public gatherings to 25 people or less. This limitation, and the fact that this virus spreads easily and with great danger to some, requires us to take decisive action now with regard to our church activities.

Having consulted with priests, religious, and lay people in the Diocese of Birmingham, including members of the medical profession, as well as with other bishops and experts, I hereby decree the following:

- The public celebration of Holy Mass is suspended in the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama through the day before Palm Sunday (April 4, 2020). The faithful are dispensed from any Mass obligations during this time.
- The faithful are encouraged to remember the moral obligation to keep the Sabbath holy that remains, even when attending Mass is impossible. This may be done by watching a Mass on television or online, meditating on the readings, saying other prayers and devotions, and so forth – including the laudable practice of making a Spiritual Communion. It is up to each individual and family to determine how to keep Sundays holy.
- Pastors and Administrators are encouraged to have their churches open regularly so that the faithful can come for private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, cautious to maintain appropriate “social distancing” and crowd size.
- Priests are encouraged to celebrate Mass daily in private for the Mass intentions they have accepted and with a special remembrance of the faithful of the Diocese in their prayers. All Pastors and Administrators remain bound by their canonical obligation to offer Mass “for the people of the parish” (*pro populo*) on Sundays and holydays of obligation.
- Where possible, priests might seek ways to broadcast or livestream their Masses, to help parishioners remain connected to their parishes and participating spiritually from home.
- Confessions should not be heard in ordinary enclosed confessionals, in order to reduce risk of transmission of the virus. Priests should consider creative and generous ways to offer the Sacrament of Confession, such as having it in larger parish halls or outdoors, always careful to safeguard the privacy of penitents.
- Weddings are prohibited during the Lenten season according to the longstanding Marriage Policy of the Diocese of Birmingham; nevertheless, should there be any weddings by way of exception, these should be limited to no more than 25 people total, including the five people required for the Catholic form of the sacrament: namely, the couple, the priest or deacon celebrant, and the two witnesses – being careful to maintain the recommended “social distancing”.

- The Anointing of the Sick should be administered generously, but taking prudent precautions and observing the access policies of local hospitals and nursing homes.
- Funerals may be celebrated only with an outdoor graveside ceremony; a memorial Mass in a church or chapel may be scheduled once these restrictions have been lifted.
- Baptisms should be delayed if it is possible to do so without danger; in danger of death and in other exceptional circumstances, Baptism should be administered, being careful to maintain appropriate “social distancing” and limiting group size to 25 or less.
- If Holy Water fonts have not already been emptied, they should be emptied and disinfected immediately. Holy Water may be made available through a dispenser/tank in the church, for those who wish to fill their private bottles.
- All other parish devotions and activities are to be suspended, to include Stations of the Cross, fish fries, bible studies, bingo, prayer groups, and other gatherings on our church properties.
- Pastors and Administrators should strive to prudently accommodate the reasonable pastoral requests they receive from their parishioners (for example, requests for office visits).

Our situation in Alabama continues to evolve and it may well prove necessary to amend these directives. In addition, I will review them in the time leading up to Palm Sunday weekend to determine any extension or other changes that may be necessary.

I also encourage you to continue financial support of your parish and other charities that serve the poor while we wait for the pandemic to pass.

As your Bishop, I want to assure that my prayers and the prayers of your priests, deacons, our religious, and parish employees are with you as we navigate this challenge together. We ask our Lord Jesus Christ to grant us His healing and peace, helping us to preserve a spirit of joyful hope during this difficult time.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert J. Baker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Robert J. Baker, S.T.D.
Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama

RJB:bwj