



Diocese of Richmond

Office of the Bishop

March 16, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As anxiety and concerns about the possible spread of COVID-19 takes root throughout this land and so much of the world, the Lord is speaking to us, calling us to a deeper relationship with him. This age may seem to be a time of fear and isolation, but we have an opportunity to see it in a new light, as a retreat into the desert with Our Lord and to encounter God in solitude and prayer. As Psalm 91 says:

“You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the plague that prowls in the darkness, nor the scourge that lays waste at noon. A thousand may fall at our side, ten thousand fall at your right, you it will never approach; his faithfulness is buckler and shield.”

Given the necessary restrictions to public gatherings in the Commonwealth of Virginia, to ensure the common good, to provide for public health and safety, and yet to maintain the mission of the Church allowing access to the sacraments, to Church teaching and to works of charity in a way appropriate to the circumstances of our age, as well as to renew our spiritual vitality as a diocese during a time of Jubilee, I am instructing the following to take place within our diocese.

As a suspension of all public celebrations of Mass, on Sundays, holy days and weekdays in the Diocese of Richmond takes place, and as the days grow longer and the light of spring begins to shine, opening our eyes to the goodness of God, I invite all the faithful in their homes and in the solitude of their hearts to draw close to Christ our light in prayer and interior desire for the Lord who dwells within our hearts – asking for the grace of forgiveness, recovery of our spiritual sight and of an awakening of desire for God to be strengthened within us.

This weekend, during a private celebration of Mass at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart and in the midst of our Jubilee year, I will celebrate Mass without a congregation, asking God’s grace and forgiveness, consecrating our diocese to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Immaculate Heart of Mary. So that you may join me in this moment, it will be streamed live for the faithful.

Each priest is to celebrate his daily Mass in private in the church or a chapel on behalf of the intentions of his parish and for the universal Church to assist all those affected by COVID-19.

For the time being, I am instructing that during the daylight hours all of our parish churches are to keep their doors open for the possibility of private prayer or devotion. As the People of God of necessity go to the grocery store for food, they can also drop by their parish church to sustain their spiritual lives.

If quarantines or greater public restrictions are put in place limiting to a greater degree public movement and gatherings, or if more than 50 people recommended by the CDC gather in the church building, it will be closed to further access from outside.

While open, a porter, assigned by the pastor, is to be stationed during the daylight hours at the one unlocked door of the church so that no more than 50 people at any one time may be in the Church.

Individually, and always keeping an appropriate social distance from one another, parishioners are free, during a time of fear and uncertainty, to come at their discretion during the day for personal devotion, communion by desire, to pray the rosary or the Stations of the Cross.

I am also asking at this time that the Blessed Sacrament be move to the center of the large or main body of the church. Our Lord is to be reserved and secured in the tabernacle, clearly visible in the larger main body of the church throughout daylight hours especially Saturday and Sunday - so that during private devotion and prayer, appropriate social distancing can be maintained, which is impossible in the smaller adoration chapels.

Priests are to be available for personal confessions at specific times of the day in a large adjacent room that would allow security, limited access and provide at least six feet of space between them and any penitent.

Pastoral care by the priest to the sick is of utmost importance during this time. If a priest is unable to visit the sick for whatever reason or concerned with visiting sick because he fits one of the vulnerable categories, he will contact his dean.

Communion will not normally be brought to any other parishioner who is homebound or who cannot attend Mass. Prayers for communion by desire will be widely available in the church and the parish website. Communion, if requested, will be brought to those who are near death when administering Viaticum.

Lay volunteers will not be visiting the sick in any *official* capacity. Deacons may visit the sick using their discretion, taking into consideration their age or immunocompromised status.

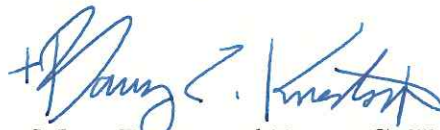
Essential charitable efforts to the poor and vulnerable will continue with some adaptations. Restrictions will be in place for no more than 25 people in a building at a time. It will be recommended that only individuals who are not within vulnerable groups or immunocompromised be the ones to assist the poor. Hot food service or seated food service in soup kitchens will be discontinued and replaced by grab-and-go options. All surfaces, including restrooms, must be sanitized frequently. Drop-off locations for donations should be outside the main facility thus limiting those who may be exposed to larger groups.

With these provisions in place, we will continue with the Church's mission: teaching the faith, celebrating the sacraments as needed in this age, and care for the poor, even as we support the common good and assure the health and well-being of our neighbor.

As the world responds to this emergency, we turn our attention to the Holy Spirit to give us strength and courage in times of trial and suffering. We offer our prayers to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and ask the intercession of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. May we know the depths of the Lord's merciful love and may Our Lady keep us in the mantle of her protection to intercede for us in our time of need.

With the assurance of prayers for you and all affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, I am,

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Barry C. Knestout".

Most Reverend Barry C. Knestout
Bishop of Richmond