

April 21, 2020

Dear Diocesan Family,

Peace be with you! The Easter season we have entered into celebrates the Resurrection of our Lord and all that this epochal moment in salvation history means for the human family. For 50 days, we will contemplate what this particular moment signifies for you and me. Yet, this sacred season still finds us contending with the Coronavirus pandemic and the national emergency that has ensued. It has challenged each and every one of us during one of the holiest seasons in the Catholic Church. I am grateful to our clergy, religious and laity in finding innovative ways to celebrate the Mass and other significant liturgical celebrations. What I have witnessed throughout this time is a real hunger for the Faith and a hunger for the Eucharist.

As you may suspect, I have received emails and letters requesting me to re-open our churches for the celebration of the Sacraments, particularly the Holy Eucharist. There is nothing more that I want to do! However, in conscience, I cannot do so until I am certain that we have the means to safely worship without further spread of disease and that we are not putting the wider community in harm's way. This is not a question of faith, but of God-given common sense. It is becoming evident even now that upon allowing for greater interaction where the infection rate has dropped, a second wave of illness has occurred. Therefore, I feel we must err on the side of caution in order to eradicate this deadly virus from our communities and will continue to follow the directives of local authorities.

This being said, in cooperation and consultation with local civil and health authorities, I am looking for ways by which Holy Mass and the Sacrament of Penance may be celebrated publicly and more readily in the near future. As a first step, I am asking our parish priests to look at the seating capacity of their church buildings using the formula for social distancing. I am also seeking to determine where extra Masses may be added at our larger churches where there is sufficient help and where sanitizing would be available between Masses. The *Code of Canon Law* permits a priest to offer Mass three times on a Sunday, but I must also take into consideration the age and health of our priests. Finally, where pastors may have access to a large parking lot, I am looking to see if an outdoor Mass with participants staying in their cars is feasible as an interim measure if not permitted to gather in our church buildings. Above all, the Eucharist is to be an expression of our unity and so all that we do must foster this unity.

No matter what is decided, we must all acknowledge that things will not return fully to the way they were. As such, the dispensation from the Sunday Mass obligation will remain in place for the foreseeable future because of the vulnerable population and the crowd sizes that will be permitted. I anticipate that once we are able to celebrate public Masses, there will be a seating capacity in our churches which will require the faithful to be flexible about the time they attend Mass. Seating and Communion procedures will have to follow social distancing and safety precautions will have to be used throughout our time together.

Many events in our Diocese will be re-scheduled and some may not happen this year. Again, rules governing public gatherings will dictate the timetable for First Communion and Confirmation celebrations in our parishes. For now, all these ceremonies are postponed until we have a better idea of how we can proceed. It is still my hope that the Ordination of the Transitional Deacons and the Chrism Mass will

happen in the latter part of June. We have moved the Ordination to Priesthood to August 15th and are looking to the Fall for the Ordination to the Permanent Diaconate.

Unfortunately, there are many things in both parish and diocesan life that remain in limbo and they may do so for a while depending on the status of the pandemic. This can be a great source of frustration for you and me, but I have seen many blessings coming from our trials and tribulations. In fact, although I may want things to return to a normalcy, I don't want you and I to forget the lessons this pandemic is teaching us in terms of love of God and neighbor. In the *First Letter of Peter* that is being read on the Sundays of the Easter Season, we hear that: *"In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that, though perishable is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed"* (1 Pt. 6-7). I am encountering a newfound thirst for our faith lives and that is why I am praying that this time in our locked room will produce a new Pentecost – a new public expression of faith in God and a way of life consistent with it.

Our collective knowledge states that we are going to go through phases in the re-opening of our communities. Although difficult, I ask that you join me in the care and concern of our neighbors and do all we can to help put an end to this virus. Sadly, my own family has joined other families in this nation who have lost loved ones because of this disease. It is my hope that by adhering to the public health protocols, we will have fewer families experiencing a loss.

While we wait for the next phase of re-entry, I do want to encourage you to continue to take advantage of all that is available in our parishes and through our Diocesan TV, Catholic Sun and our Diocesan website. It has been a privilege for me to connect with you in these ways and I have very much felt your presence! And please, do not forget to remember your parishes by mailing your weekly financial support or through online contributions. These ventures are setting the stage for our future endeavors in spreading the Gospel and providing spiritual care to Christ's faithful in Central New York and beyond.

I assure you of my continued prayers and again express my deep gratitude to all who are caring for us on the front lines of this pandemic. May the Risen Lord give all His grace and peace!

In the Name of Jesus,

Most Reverend Douglas J. Lucia
Bishop of Syracuse