

## To the Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Baton Rouge

As is already clear from the continued closings throughout our country and state, the Coronavirus continues to spread rapidly throughout many of our communities. Several bishops in the United States and in the Province of New Orleans have taken the difficult step with me to offer the faithful a dispensation from their obligation to attend Sunday Mass.

Local leaders, including Governor Edwards, continue to announce aggressive measures to prevent the spread of the virus. These include limiting the size of public gatherings and closing venues such as restaurants and theaters to significantly expand mitigation efforts to slow the progress of further community spread. Action must be taken now in order to protect our communities.

Mindful of these further developments while concomitantly considering the desire of the faithful to receive the sacraments, the following provisions will be in effect in the Diocese of Baton Rouge beginning Wednesday, 18 March 2020:

1. The Sunday Mass obligation continues to be dispensed for all Catholics as long as this threat persists. Further, as was previously announced, public Masses are to be suspended beginning Tuesday, 17 March 2020. Priests may celebrate Mass *privately*.
2. Whenever possible, and at the Pastor's discretion, the Parish Church is allowed to remain open for some time during daylight hours for prayer until further notice. If opened, times will be advertised by the Pastor. All adoration chapels should be closed until further directed. Appropriate social distancing should be practiced by any visitor to the Parish Church.
3. Pastors are to cancel all unnecessary gatherings of parishioners for the months of March and April. These include large social events like parish festivals, seated meals, processions and indeed any parish function where more than 10 people would be required to gather in a confined space.
4. All communal penance services are cancelled. The Sacrament of Reconciliation should only be offered at the request and need of an individual penitent. Regularly scheduled and advertised times of reconciliation should be suspended until further notice.
5. All Holy Water fonts should be drained until further notice.
6. All parishes in the Diocese of Baton Rouge are asked to limit baptisms to private and small family celebrations. Fresh water should be used for all baptisms and drained immediately thereafter.
7. Funerals are to be celebrated only with immediate family (parents, spouses, siblings, children, and grandchildren), clergy and funeral staff present. Funeral Masses and services in the Church are not allowed. It is recommended that the *Funeral Liturgy Outside of Mass* and/or the *Rite of Committal* be celebrated at the graveside or at the funeral home according to pastoral need.
8. Weddings are to be celebrated only with the bride, groom, celebrant, two witness and immediate family (parents, siblings, and children) present. Mass should not be celebrated.

9. Delivery of communion to those at home, in nursing homes or in other healthcare facilities on a regular basis should be discontinued indefinitely; this does not apply in danger of death or when a person is in need of viaticum. Ministers should take proper precautions to protect themselves and those they serve in any of these visits.
10. Catholics believe in the healing power of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. Priests should assure that all appropriate hospital protocols are followed, and hospital staff should be consulted before entering a patient's room. It is crucial that the highest sanitary precautions be considered when visiting the sick! If a priest is to visit someone exhibiting symptoms, he should wear mask and gloves, wash his hands appropriately, not linger, and wear a gown to cover his clothes. If a priest is asked to anoint someone who has been diagnosed with Coronavirus or who has its symptoms, please contact the Chancery. Any minister who has unprotected close contact with someone with the virus must self-quarantine for two weeks minimum.

Ministers may encounter situations where they are denied access to patients. In such situations, it is recommended that the priest call the individual and pray with them by phone. The faithful should be aware that because of regulations by nursing facilities and hospitals, priests may not in all circumstances be able to anoint a patient, even in danger of death.

11. Parish and Diocesan Offices will remain open, though some schedules might be reduced on the parochial level at the discretion of the Pastor. The lay faithful are encouraged to conduct as much Parish or Diocesan business as possible either by phone or email. This provision remains subject to change pending any future directives.

After Easter, I will make a further determination regarding extending or retracting any of the above provisions based upon the current situation in our community with the Coronavirus.

I do not make these decisions lightly. In consultations with leaders in our Diocese, and for the sake of the safety of those to whom we minister, precaution is necessary to slow the spread of this pandemic. Know that I remember all of you in prayer during this difficult time. We join our sacrifices to others throughout our country during these trying times.

In Christ our Hope,

Most Reverend Michael Gerard Duca  
Bishop of Baton Rouge

*Given at the Chancery of Baton Rouge  
17 March 2020*