

Dear Parishioners of St. Michael, St. Joseph, and Most Sacred Heart,

It is with a heavy and troubled heart that I write this to you during this time of crisis brought on by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Each and every life around the world has been challenged and changed by this disease, whether we are immediately touched by it or not! Along with each of you, I feel stressed and worried by all the news and all the consequences. Yet, I trust that you, like me, continue to place our faith, hope, and peace in the hands of God. I believe that no matter the sacrifices and strains we currently experience, by God's grace we will be victorious in the end. No one knows how long we must endure and persevere; I lift you up in prayer many times through each day, so please offer a prayer for me as well. Please consider using the prayer printed on the cover of this bulletin each day as we search for God's presence in our lives.

Many complications have been generated by this virus, its phenomenally contagious character, and the directives being issued by federal, state, and local officials. We must pray for all of our leaders as they try to preserve public health and security. These necessary directives have required the Catholic Church to respond through our bishops with instructions specific to our faith life, and these must be applied to our local parishes and communities. Bishop Michael Duca, in consultation with his priests' council, has issued instructions specific to the Diocese of Baton Rouge. [No matter what neighboring dioceses do, we must follow the lead of our bishop.] What follows is my effort to apply the instructions of Bishop Duca to our parish cluster. I request your cooperation and understanding.

Fr. Vincent J. Dufresne

## **MASS:**

On Monday, March 16th, Bishop Duca instructed us:

"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*."

Because the Bishop stresses (his italics) *private* Masses by the priests, we are not allowed to celebrate any Masses for small groups, even less than 10, whether "home" Masses or otherwise. [I have received this request and been forced to deny it each time.]

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** Your pastor and associate pastor will offer a Mass each day in the Sacred Heart rectory chapel; this Mass will be for all parishioner Mass intentions received for the day. So you know when each Mass is being offered and can participate "spiritually" because you cannot be there physically, we will follow this schedule: Mon. – Fri. at 11am; Sat. at 5pm; Sun. at 10am.

We encourage every parishioner to use this internet link to the daily Vatican Mass offered by Pope Francis: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en.html> (You will need to click on the Mass link once you call up this page). Or, this website: <https://mass-online.org/daily-holy-mass-live-online/> allows you to choose from any number of Masses in English. Also, please consider using the televised Masses broadcasted on EWTN and Catholic Life Television of Baton Rouge. [These choices are better than any attempt we might make locally to live-stream our private Mass.]

There is a long-standing tradition of "Spiritual Communion" in the Church. This means that when an individual is deprived of the Host for any reason, that person by spiritual intention can receive graces by watching the Sacrifice of the Mass.

Bishop Duca offers these words:

“During these days where the faithful will not receive sacramental communion, they should be invited to turn to Jesus with their heart to receive Christ spiritually. While watching televised Mass, for example, the faithful could be invited to say a prayer during the normal time in the Mass when communion would be received. Here is an example prayer authored by St. Alphonsus Ligouri:

**My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Blessed Sacrament.  
I love you above all things and I desire you with all my heart.  
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,  
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.  
I embrace you as if you were already in my heart  
and unite myself to you completely.  
Please do not let me ever be separated from you.”**

## **PRIVATE PRAYER:**

Bishop Duca has instructed us:

“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. . . . All adoration chapels should be closed until further directed. Appropriate social distancing should be practiced by any visitor to the Parish Church.”

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** We are happy to keep the church buildings open for private prayer, observing the following schedule by location:

**St. Michael Church in Convent,**

is open 7 days a week, Sunday through Saturday, 8:00am to 6:00pm.

**St. Joseph Church in Paulina,**

is open Monday through Friday, 8:00am to 4:00pm,  
and on Saturday, 2:00pm to 6:00pm, and Sunday, 8:00am to 12 Noon.

**Sacred Heart Church in Gramercy,**

will not be open Monday through Thursday, but is open Friday, 4:00pm to 6:00pm,  
and on Saturday, 2:00pm to 6:00pm, and Sunday, 8:00am to 12 Noon.

**Prompt Succor Chapel in Lutchter and the Perpetual Adoration Chapel**

shall remain closed throughout the duration of the crisis.

When using any of the churches for personal and private prayer, please bring your own prayer material to reduce the possibility of creating unsafe conditions. Stations of the Cross brochures will be in each church (*not* the Marian Station booklets) for you to use and take home as your own.

“*Social distancing*” means that we keep an approximate 6 foot distance between any two people. If you see another person in a pew, or standing / kneeling in prayer, please kindly avoid getting too close. [Remember, the Coronavirus can be transmitted through the air as well as by touch.]

## **SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION:**

Bishop Duca has instructed us:

“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.”

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** This instruction might seem harsh at first reading, but it is intended to curtail *inadvertent* “gatherings of over 10 people” (prohibited by civil directive). The likelihood that more than 10 people would line up for confessions if we schedule 3pm as a starting time is very real, and the Bishop – and we – should respect our civil leaders.

Please know that both of your priests realize people want and need the Sacrament of Reconciliation, so please call the Pastoral Center to schedule a personal time. We will make ourselves as available as necessary, at the office or at any of the three churches, but we cannot create a schedule or advertise a time for the Sacrament.

## **Holy Week, the Triduum, and Easter Sunday:**

Bishop Duca has stated:

“You should assume that the policy to suspend public celebrations of the Eucharist will continue through Easter. So do not plan to celebrate any public celebration of the Triduum in the parish.

Pastors can celebrate Passion Sunday Mass (privately) and bless the palms (this blessing of the palms could be done even outside of Mass) and simply make them available to the faithful at a designated time outside or within the Church.

I will celebrate the Chrism Mass, likely with a small number of persons and televised from the Cathedral. Parishes will then likely have to pick up their oils at properly designated times. The Triduum will not be celebrated publicly in individual parish churches. These celebrations are meant to be communal ones. I would invite all of our clergy to watch these televised liturgies and join with me spiritually for the celebrations.

Since the Easter Vigil will be cancelled, the RCIA Elect and Candidates for Full Communion cannot be brought into the Church at the traditional time. Therefore, I am going to ask that outside of danger of death, their acceptance into full communion be postponed until the first public celebrations of Mass in the Diocese of Baton Rouge begin again.”

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** For Palm Sunday, we will celebrate a Saturday Vigil Mass and a Sunday Mass for the intentions of the parishioners as explained under “Mass” above. As Bishop Duca directs, we will have blessed palms available at each parish church when the church opens for private prayer on Palm Sunday weekend so that you can bring a palm home with you.

Your priests will obey the Bishop’s directions and participate in the Chrism Mass and the Triduum Services (Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil) broadcasted from St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge. This will likely mean that our churches will be closed at those times to encourage everyone to tune into the Cathedral celebrations with Bishop Duca.

We will have a private Easter Sunday Mass, as explained under “Mass” above, to cover all the Easter intentions of our parishioners. We regret that our RCIA Elect and Candidates will need to wait for their sacraments and entry into the Catholic Faith. This will be celebrated as soon as the crisis is over and we return to normal Masses.

## **SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM:**

Bishop Duca has instructed us:

“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.”

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** This will apply to us after Easter because there are no baptisms during Lent unless a “danger of death” exists. At that time, we will work with each family on a case by case basis to schedule baptisms by either of our priests or deacons.

*Please note:* it appears to be most likely that the restriction on public Masses will include Easter Sunday and beyond, but we can start celebrating private baptisms on Easter Sunday according to this instruction.

## **FUNERALS:**

Bishop Duca has instructed us:

“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.”

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** We will follow this instruction as written, scheduling a Funeral Home or Graveside service according to each family’s choice. This means: normal prayers, Scripture readings, and blessings with Holy Water. We cannot celebrate in Church or with a Mass until the crisis has passed and things return to normal.

*Please note:* when things do return to normal, we will gladly offer Memorial Masses for the deceased who could not have a Funeral Mass. However, because of logistics, we might need to combine several memorials into one Mass. Time will tell.

## **WEDDINGS:**

Bishop Duca has instructed us:

“Weddings are to be celebrated only with the bride, groom, celebrant, two witnesses and immediate family (parents, siblings, and children) present. Mass should not be celebrated.”

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** This, as with baptisms, will apply to us after Easter because there are no weddings scheduled during Lent. Because we do not know when the restriction on large gatherings or public Masses will be lifted, we will work with already scheduled weddings to plan for either eventuality, a restricted celebration or a normal celebration. The Church has no say over receptions following the wedding ceremony, but we ask couples to observe the civic rules in place at the time of their wedding.

## **SACRAMENTS FOR THE SICK:**

Bishop Duca has instructed us in regard to Communion to the sick:

“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.”

Bishop Duca has instructed us in regard to the Anointing of the sick:

“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. . . . 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.”

This instruction on sacraments for the sick might seem overly restrictive, but the Bishop has the health and well-being of the sick person and that of the minister / priest in mind.

First, a minister of Communion, even a priest, might be an unknown carrier of the virus. By visiting someone at greater risk, we could endanger their life, and that must not be done at all costs – this is the very reason public Masses have been cancelled.

Second, your priests must be available to care for as many people as possible in as many situations as possible. Coming into contact with a person that would require the priest to self-quarantine for two weeks would deny priestly ministry to many other people.

***WHAT WE ARE DOING:*** First and foremost, please let us know as soon as possible if someone is positively diagnosed as having COVID-19, so that we can begin offering pastoral assistance to the person and family. Hospital visits will require we follow hospital protocols and the directions of medical personnel. In the case of a person quarantined at home, we do not anticipate breaking the quarantine; we do not have access to medical gowns, masks, or gloves as we would at a hospital.

Please know that both of your priests are ready and willing to bring Holy Communion and to offer the Anointing of the Sick to those in danger of death. Family members should call the Pastoral Center and leave a message. After hours, please use the Voice Mail message system to leave a message for the Emergency Voice Mail system, which contacts the priest. Someone will be there as soon as humanly possible.

## **Pastoral Center Office Hours:**

Bishop Duca has instructed us:

“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.”

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** The Pastoral Center Office Hours remain Mon. - Fri., 8am - 4pm. However, for the safety of staff and visitors alike, we are not accepting “walk-in” visitors at this time. Please call or e-mail the person you need to see and set up an appointment. Staff e-mails can be found on the parish website. We will try to do as much business as possible by phone or e-mail so as to avoid unnecessary contact, reducing the risk of transmitting any germs. For those who must come to the office for appointments or business, we will observe social distancing protocols.

## **First Holy Communion:**

Bishop Duca has not offered any instruction specific to this issue, so we are formulating a policy in keeping with the other directives and instructions in place.

**WHAT WE ARE DOING:** The celebration of First Holy Communion is postponed until further notice. The children and parents would still have the morning retreat to attend, the practices, as well as the Sunday Mass celebration. Obviously we will restart the process once the crisis has ended.

## **Parish Contributions:**

We realize that everyone is more money-conscious than usual at times like this because the future is so “unknown.” We respect that some individual’s jobs might also be uncertain because this pandemic is bringing changes to the local, national, and world economy. Yet, our parishes continue to have their standard expenses and bills. Therefore, we must remind everyone that your contributions are still needed for your parish to provide ongoing and future ministries. Even if we do not have Masses and collections at this time, your contributions sustain the life of the parish.

This is an excellent time to consider switching to **Online Giving**. On the cluster website under each parish is the online giving logo. Click on your parish’s online giving logo to sign up. You control how much and how often your checking account will be debited for our Regular Collection, our Building & Maintenance Collection, and any and all Special Collections. You have the ability to start and stop this method of parish support at any time.

You are also encouraged to mail in your contribution, especially if you are giving by check. We never recommend mailing cash. If it is easier to switch to a monthly contribution than every week, that is also a possibility.

If you plan to continue contributing with cash, that is fine of course. You can drop off your donation at the Pastoral Center, or invite a family member or friend to do this for you.

We are ever so grateful for your ongoing support and contributions in whatever form you choose to your parish. Without your donation of whatever you see yourself able to give, we would lose many of our vital services.