

**For Immediate Release**

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## Duluth Diocese dispenses Catholics in the region from Sunday Mass obligation

In light of the rapid spread of the coronavirus (covid-19) across the world and now to Minnesota, Father James B. Bissonette, diocesan administrator for the Diocese of Duluth, has dispensed Catholics in the diocese from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation for the duration of the crisis.

For Catholics, attending Mass on Sundays and certain other important holy days is an obligation and a precept of the church. That obligation is not binding in certain circumstances, for instance when it would be impossible or in cases of illness. For just reasons, the church's pastors can also "dispense" or lift that obligation for the faithful.

In a letter to the faithful to be read at Masses this weekend, Father Bissonette said that during this time, Masses will continue to be celebrated at the usual times in parishes and institutions. But should a member of the faithful decide that attending a Mass would pose a risk either to themselves or to others, they can in good conscience refrain from attending.

Father Bissonette made the decision after receiving the advice of the Minnesota Catholic Conference (the public policy arm of the state's bishops) and a local infectious disease specialist. Other dioceses in the area are taking similar steps.

At the same time, Father Bissonette advised parishes to cancel any large parish gatherings through the month of March, extending that as necessary. That includes the diocesan Women's Conference, which had been scheduled for March 28.

The decision to dispense from Mass and cancel large gatherings follows guidance issued a week ago by Father Bissonette advising pastors, at their discretion to:

- Suspend the practice of Communion under both kinds and
- Suspend the physical exchange of the Sign of Peace.

Both involve options in the liturgy of the Mass that can help reduce the likelihood of disease transmission.

Father Bissonette also encouraged pastors to tell their faithful to stay home if they feel sick or have flu-like symptoms, to wash their hands frequently, and to check with the Minnesota Department of Health and the federal Centers for Disease Control for the latest updates and recommendations.

The diocese continues to monitor the situation at the local, state, and federal level and will provide updates as needed.

In his letter to the faithful, Father Bissonette encouraged those unable to attend Mass to “still do what we can to keep holy the Lord’s Day.” He suggested such practices as following Mass on television, the radio, or online; making a Spiritual Communion; and other practices, such as silent prayer, reading Scripture, praying the rosary, or other prayerful devotions.

“As all of us rise to the challenges presented by the coronavirus, let us remember to pray for one another and to support one another as children of God and brothers and sisters of the Lord, most especially those affected by this virus and those who care for them,” he said.

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