

**UPDATED:** March 24, 2020

Dear Parishioners & Friends,

By now you will certainly have heard BOTH of the following announcements relating to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic:

A. Given the frightening escalation of the outbreak in so brief a time, and the determination on the part of local, state, and federal leaders to slow its spread before the situation becomes truly catastrophic, our Diocese has taken the unprecedented step of CANCELING all Masses—both weekday and weekend—as well as all planned meetings, parish devotions, lectures, classes, and other gatherings at least through **Tuesday, April 14th**. This is in large part driven by the CDC's recommendation that all Americans practice radical “social distancing,” with NO groups larger than 10 gathering in one place.

B. On Friday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, Governor Mario Cuomo issued an executive order whereby all non-essential workplace personnel are to **remain at home**, beginning at 8:00 PM on Sunday, March 22<sup>nd</sup>. In compliance with the Governor’s directive, virtually all parish personnel will be staying home as of Monday the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Because we operate a Food Pantry, and because the church building continues to require careful cleaning and sanitizing, a certain few of our staff will be permitted to come in on a limited basis. But for the most part, **the parish offices are now closed**.

One comment before I go into some more specific details: If you look at the calendar, April 14<sup>th</sup> is *after Easter*, so this almost total suspension of parish activities **includes the services of Holy Week and Easter Sunday**. It's almost impossible to believe, and it brings a great weight of sadness to me, to our parish staff, and (I'm sure) to this wonderful faith community of ours. But if these protocols, far-reaching and drastic as they may seem, help to slow the spread of this viral pandemic, and prevents the loss of even one life, then it's worth the temporary disappointment, hurt and inconvenience we're burdened by.

1. I myself, or a visiting priest, will be celebrating Mass privately each day, for the intentions that have been entrusted to us. But these Masses will typically have no one in attendance.

2. I intend to keep the church building open for a good part of the day for private prayer. The hours are **10:00 AM till 4:00 PM, Monday through Saturday, and 9:00 AM**

**till 12 Noon on Sunday** (hours subject to change). But I'm afraid there can be no Mass celebrated during these times, nor groups coming together in any organized or communal way. The church is open **for private prayer ONLY**. The idea, as you've heard so often, is to avoid bringing people into contact with one another, even if that means temporarily praying at home in a more solitary fashion. Signs are posted listing the hours during which the church is open. **Note:** Monday through Saturday, please use only the Handsome Ave. doors; the west side of the building will be locked.

3. The Mass can be viewed, and Communion shared in spiritually every day, by going to a number of TV stations and websites, including our Diocese's own **Catholic Faith Network** (Optimum 29). Please see the links on our website's homepage for further options and information. The services of Holy Week and Easter will also be broadcast live from St. Agnes Cathedral on CFN. It is possible that we may undertake to record certain liturgies (minus a congregation) from our own church, especially during Holy Week and Easter, but this prospect is still to being looked into.

4. The celebration of baptisms, weddings and funerals is prohibited at this time. A family who has lost a loved one may choose to have a simple committal service at the cemetery with only a few in attendance, and then at a later date—when this health crisis has passed—bring together a larger group of family and friends for a memorial liturgy.

5. Unfortunately, the sacrament of Reconciliation (confession) will not be taking place at its regular time on Saturday afternoon, nor on the Monday of Holy Week. Especially during Lent, it would not be unusual to have many more than 10 people gathering for the sacrament, and the need for quiet, **physically close conversation** would require setting aside the radical social distancing we are being challenged to practice. Those who feel they have a serious need for the sacrament can call for an appointment. Lent is normally an ideal time for confession, but **there is no requirement to celebrate the sacrament during this season**. One's "Easter Duty" refers to the obligation to receive Holy Communion sometime between the beginning of Lent and Trinity Sunday (June 7<sup>th</sup>).

6. Despite appearances to the contrary—even as we comply with Governor Cuomo's mandate—*the parish is not closed*. Offices will not be staffed as usual, but many of our employees will be working from home, and we will continue to be available to you as best we can given the constraints being placed upon us. Particularly in the case of an emergency, don't ever hesitate to contact us. We will do our best to help you in any way reasonably possible.

7. For the time being, **Parish Outreach** will continue its indispensable work of ministering to the needy in our community; hours are confined to **Wednesdays, from 10:00 AM to 12 Noon, and only Food Pantry assistance can be provided at this time.** Please continue to support the work of Parish Outreach with your generosity; don't forget to stuff the poor boxes, and the food donation chests in the rear of the church!

8. We will do our best to stay in communication with you during this trying time—the coming weeks will probably feel very, VERY long, and of course there can be no guarantee that this international crisis will not require extending measures well beyond April 14<sup>th</sup>. Check the parish website for changes or updates (this document is itself an update!); check your email as well. **If you're not on our email list, please submit your contact information to the rectory office so we can reach you.**

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To many of you, this may feel like the Church is shutting down at the very time it's needed most, and I wouldn't presume to contest those honest feelings. We are not only social beings, who thrive on basic contact with one another, but also members of the Body of Christ, which draws its mystical vitality from the Eucharist first and foremost. For many of us, the prospect of going *without* the Eucharist for an extended period of time is cause for real upsetment, even grief. However, our parish and Diocese are following a Gospel imperative to care in very concrete ways for our sisters and brothers, by shouldering this Lenten cross for a time so that the spread of the coronavirus can be mitigated. If we, as a Christian community, can help slow the escalation of this disease, giving our healthcare professionals the time they need to overcome it, and perhaps save even one person's life by practicing the drastic form of social distancing our local and national leaders are calling for, I believe the Lord would urge us to do so.

Please continue your prayers for one another; for the sick and those who have died; for health care workers, researchers and emergency personnel; for our nation and the larger world, and for our beloved parish and the global Church. Never forget that the Lord, our Divine Physician, is in our midst, even (and especially) at a time of so much bewilderment, worry, and suffering.

My prayers and fond wishes go out to all of you at this time.

*Father Brian*