



Diocese of Peoria

**Office of the Vicar General
Spalding Pastoral Center
419 N.E. Madison Avenue
Peoria, Illinois 61603**

309-671-1550

21 March 2020

My dear brother priests,

I am confident that you are enduring the present moment with the faith and hope characteristic of a son of God and a priest of Jesus Christ. The countless ways that I see you reaching out to the people entrusted to your care is deeply moving and inspiring. Our Father God will bless you for it!

This is a lengthy letter, but I thought it is important to give some of the rationale behind the decision-making of the moment and the new directives that are in effect. Every indication we have is that the current pandemic will continue unabated for the foreseeable future. Because few of us have encountered anyone who actually has the virus, it can seem like a phantom disease – and therefore the preventative measures being taken to contain it appear excessive and unnecessarily restrictive. Several things seem clear to us:

- The number of confirmed cases is growing rapidly in Illinois. According to the Illinois Department of Public Health, there were 7 reported cases on March 8. By March 20, that number had grown to 585. The number of cases has risen an average of 46% *each day* for the past thirteen days. Part of that can be attributed to the limited availability of testing. But the point is that the number of people infected is growing exponentially, not linearly. A helpful video illustrating exponential growth as regards a virus can be found [here](#). New cases cease when the virus cannot reach an uninfected person – either because *everyone* is infected, or because our efforts at keeping people from coming into contact with the virus prevent its spread.
- There are known cases of people who have tested positive for the virus but have shown no symptoms. They are carrying the virus but do not know it.
- Once our healthcare system is overloaded, many will die – especially the most vulnerable among us.

So the question is, how do we as people of faith and as responsible citizens best respond to this? On the one hand, we want to be present to our people and allow them to receive all the spiritual assistance the Church has at her disposal. On the other hand, realizing that our parishioners are entrusted to our care, it is our responsibility to act prudently. Prudence, as we all know so well, is right reason in acting (*recta ratio agibilium*), or the right way of doing things. Without prudence, caution becomes cowardice and bravery becomes foolhardiness. Please pray that the decision makers at every level of civil and ecclesial governance are granted the prudence they need in this present moment.

Pursuant to the Governor's Shelter-In-Place Order for the State of Illinois, beginning at 5PM on Saturday, March 21, and continuing through April 7:

- All churches and chapels must be closed and locked until the Governor's order is lifted.
- Instances of priests traveling to religious houses for Mass will be discontinued until the Governor's Order is lifted.
- All weddings and baptisms must be postponed and can be re-scheduled only once the Order is lifted. The only exception to this will be in the case of a true emergency. Contact the Vicar General for permission in this case.
- Funerals and wakes are not permitted at this time. Only Burials with the Rite of Committal will continue to take place, as per the previous Directives, though they must be entirely outdoors.
- Parish offices are to remain closed. That stated, each Pastor and his staff must identify the essential functions that need to continue. It is our expectation that parish staff work from home and will not have any extended time whatsoever in the parish office.
- Decisions regarding social outreach programs will be made on a case-by-case basis. Contact the Vicar General for direction in specific cases.

At present, our pastoral attention will be specifically focused on those who are near death and need immediate attention. We are presently developing guidelines for the best way to respond to those who have (or can be presumed to have) the coronavirus and who desire to receive pastoral care. Hospitals and other care facilities already have their own protocols in place, but over time some people will simply remain in their home. After considerable thought and careful consideration, we have decided to seek volunteers from among our priests who will undertake this duty to care for those who are infected. I am reminded of the heroic example of Saint Damien the Leper who volunteered to go to Molokai to care for the victims of that horrible disease. We would begin with one such priest for our Diocese and increase the number as needed. The priest, naturally, will be required to live alone in his rectory or in another suitable location, and arrangements would have to be made in advance for how he would receive food, etc. While we do have access to some personal protective equipment (PPE), it is foreseeable that the supply of this equipment will exceed the need. If after prayerful consideration and discernment you would like to be considered for this role, you are to make that known to me. The Bishop will make the final determination of the priest(s) chosen and only those names will be made publicly known. More details on this will follow.

As we look toward the near future, we are announcing that the suspension of public worship will definitely remain in place through Easter Sunday. We are currently planning to offer live video streaming of Masses (*sine populo*) beginning with Palm Sunday and continuing through Easter Sunday. More details on that will follow.

Pope Francis, through the Apostolic Penitentiary, has granted a plenary indulgence to coronavirus patients and to Catholics who pray for them. The decree can be found [here](#). Many have spoken of how moved they were by his invitation last week to pray the Rosary with him in union with the faithful from around the world. He reminded us, "In this unprecedented situation, when everything seems to be vacillating, let us help each other remain steady in what really matters."

During this most difficult and painful time, when our people are deprived of the opportunity of receiving Our Lord in the Most Holy Eucharist, these words of Joseph Ratzinger regarding a fast from the Eucharist seem especially fitting:

When Augustine sensed his death approaching, he 'excommunicated' himself and undertook public penance. In his last days he manifested his solidarity with the public sinners who seek for pardon and grace through the renunciation of communion. He wanted to meet his Lord in the humility of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for him who is the Righteous and Merciful One. Against the background of his sermons and writings, which are a magnificent portrayal of the mystery of the Church as communion with the Body of Christ, and as the Body of Christ itself, built up by the Eucharist, this is a profoundly arresting gesture. The more I think of it, the more it moves me to reflection. Do we not often take the reception of the Blessed Sacrament too lightly? Might not this kind of spiritual fasting be of service, or even necessary, to deepen and renew our relationship to the Body of Christ?

Taken from Behold the Pierced One

Finally, Bishop Jenky has expressed to me time and again his great esteem and affection for the priests of our Diocese. He knows how difficult it is for you to not to be able to be present to your people in the usual way. You, his priest sons, are constantly on his mind and in his prayers. Please pray for him during this difficult time. He will be reaching out to us soon with his own personal message.

In gratitude for the countless ways you so generously respond to God's call, I remain,

Sincerely in the Lord,



Monsignor Philip D. Halfacre
Vicar General