

March 13, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Today, amid increasing concerns over the spread of COVID-19, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer directed all event organizers to cancel any gathering larger than 250 people.

Realizing that a number of parishes will have difficulty in keeping Mass attendance below 250 this weekend, I have regrettably decided to ask our Catholic parishes to cancel all public LORD'S DAY Masses in the Archdiocese of Ottawa this weekend of March 14-15.

After the weekend, we will assess this decision for next weekend and any other that is required after consulting health officials. For this weekend and any other which may be required, I grant the faithful dispensation from their Sunday obligation to attend Mass. Churches should remain open for private prayer and Eucharistic Adoration. Daily Mass will continue during the week.

As we know, the Holy Eucharist is the source and summit of our life in Christ. Not to celebrate the Holy Eucharist on the day of the Lord is an extraordinary spiritual suffering for the disciples of Jesus Christ. Indeed, in ancient times, the Christian martyrs of Abitene (Tunisia) had a saying, "without the Sunday Eucharist, we cannot live." For this reason, while we are following the advice of the health authorities, as is our civic duty, we hope that this period of suspension will be brief.

During this period of vigilance, the following points apply for weekday Masses at the present time and for weekend Masses when they resume:

- To limit the potential spread of COVID-19, I ask that those who are sick, feeling unwell or vulnerable to sickness, refrain from attending Mass at present.
- Televised Mass is available in French, English and other languages through a number of media (please see the attached list of resources). This provides an additional opportunity to pray for those who are suffering as well as for our health care professionals tending the sick.
- At this time, weekday parish Mass schedules should remain unchanged to allow the faithful to receive the sacraments and to be strengthened in their commitment to care for others. We will continue to communicate with health officials in the days to come to receive the most reliable and accurate information which is the foundation for our actions.

As already mentioned in earlier communications, these adaptations of liturgical practices are to be put into effect:

- We ask that parishes empty all Holy Water fonts until further notice.
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion should not receive the Precious Blood prior to the distribution of Communion. Extraordinary Ministers should ensure that their hands are washed or cleansed with hand sanitizer both before and after distribution.

- Regarding Holy Communion, some health experts have indicated that it is preferable for communicants to receive the Eucharist in the hand rather than on the tongue. Accordingly, I suggest priests encourage those who wish to receive Holy Communion on the tongue to consider receiving in the hand while the threat of the Corona virus remains or to make a “spiritual communion” (see attachment).
- However, if members of the faithful wish to exercise their right to receive on the tongue, priests may invite them to come to one particular person (the priest, deacon or a particular Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion [EMHC] willing to give Holy Communion on the tongue). Where there is only the priest present for distribution of Holy Communion, those who wish to receive communion on the tongue may be invited to come forward after those who have received on the hand.
- Parishioners are asked to refrain from shaking hands during the Sign of Peace.

Parish and Archdiocesan Life Continues during this period:

- Archdiocesan and parish offices remain open at this time for the service of the people. Hospital and nursing home visits will be subject to the norms instituted by those respective institutions. People should not attend parish activities of any kind if they are sick, vulnerable, or unwell.
- Parishes should encourage staff to practice healthy hygiene while taking steps to sanitize public spaces and “touch points” more frequently. Washing with soap and water for a sufficient amount of time is highly recommended.

During this time, when there is understandable anxiety among so many, the church has an important role to play through our outreach ministries. Particular care should be taken to ensure that the vulnerable are not alone. Parishes should explore opportunities to creatively connect with vulnerable parishioners - perhaps this is through phone calls and/or visits where appropriate. It would be an act of charity to check with elderly or shut-in neighbours to see if they require assistance as they are at risk of social isolation or increased vulnerability if they must leave home to shop for essentials.

While challenging days remain, we must also recognize the opportunity to be truly present to one another and to care for those who are struggling. These moments of uncertainty call each one of us to renew our commitment to prayer, fasting and almsgiving as part of our Lenten journey, amplified on a broader scale in light of current circumstances. May we continue to pray for all those infected with COVID-19, those caring for the sick and for one another.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

✠ Terrence Prendergast, S.J.
Archbishop of Ottawa