

March 13, 2020

Dear Brother Priests, Deacons, Pastoral Administrators, Religious and Faithful:

When the disciples were walking to Emmaus, they met up with a stranger who shared the Scripture of the Law and Prophets. What started as a disappointment — uncertainty regarding the present and future — soon became the awareness that the Lord had been with them all along. At table, they concluded so simply: “Stay with us Lord.”

As the novel coronavirus ramps up with increasing health risks to the general population throughout our country and state, and especially to our faith communities, it is necessary to make some difficult decisions to do our part in stemming the spread of this pernicious virus. In order to do so, I have consulted with the Diocesan Consultors, and read the reports from medical and scientific experts about the impact of this virus. Doing the difficult part now, I pray, will reduce the time and impact this virus will have on the vulnerable people in our congregations and communities. Being concerned about the welfare of those who are sick and vulnerable is an act of charity that will not be forgotten. During this season of Lent, our prayer and penance is key as we approach a spiritual response to the pandemic sweeping our country and state. From Saturday, March 14 through Monday, April 6, 2020, all Sunday and weekday public Masses are suspended throughout the Diocese of Gaylord. Although public Masses are temporarily suspended, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is available through the various media channels for television, radio, internet, and social media. An optimal moment to make a Spiritual Communion is at the time Mass is celebrated each day. The Sacrifice of the Mass remains efficacious and a grace-filled moment. I ask every priest to celebrate Mass in private for the intentions already determined for your parish, for those who are affected by the pandemic, for those in the medical community treating patients and for wisdom in our scientific community.

In his letter to the faithful of the Archdiocese of Detroit, Archbishop Allen Vigneron, our Metropolitan, suggested this prayer as a model to make a spiritual communion:

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.

I love you above all things and I desire to receive you in my soul.

Since I cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally,

Come at least spiritually into my heart.

I embrace you as if you were already there

And unite myself wholly to you.

Never permit me to be separated from you.

Amen.

Typically, in moments of crisis, our faithful look to their priests, their pastoral leaders, their faith and their church as an anchor of hope. To that end, I encourage churches to remain open during the day. Through private prayer and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament (located to the main body of the church for social distancing) we can be reminded of the closeness of Christ and let “heart” speak to “heart.” The pastor or pastoral administrator should be mindful not to exceed the crowd size limitations and social distancing of those in attendance.

It is also our important duty to mourn with those who have passed away. Funerals may occur provided there are a limited number of persons present – immediate family and a few friends. People in attendance should sit in a way that respects the “social distancing” guidelines. If this is not possible, consider postponing the funeral or memorial Mass to a later date. Weddings should observe the same protocols. In a similar way, Baptisms will occur outside of Mass for the time being with water blessed specifically for the rite.

As this is becoming a moment when we literally have a “field hospital,” the care for and anointing of the sick is a very important ministry for priests. Visiting the sick and health care facilities, with due regard to their safety procedures, should be viewed as an important part of our care. This allows us to be with those who are vulnerable, wounded, sick and the dying in order to provide solace, spiritual and sacramental care. With churches open for prayer and adoration, I would ask priests to increase their time hearing confessions in the Sacrament of Penance so we may experience the mercy of Christ. Communal celebrations of the Sacrament of Penance should also be suspended.

As necessary, further updates will be provided as new issues emerge. I entrust each of you to the maternal care and protection of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the patroness of our diocese, each and every day.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Steven J Raica
Bishop of Gaylord