



DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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March 16, 2020

Dear Members of the Catholic Church of Eastern Montana,

Deciding on an appropriate and measured response to the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus has been a vexing matter. How am I as a bishop and we as a diocese to respond in a way that allows us to continue practicing our faith, a faith centered in the Eucharist? And yet the fact remains that we are in a “state of emergency.” My responsibility as the Bishop of the Diocese is to be sure that the faithful are safe from disease and that decisions that are made provide a sense of peace and freedom from anxiety regarding how we respond.

This Monday, March 16, 2020, I held a conference call with a majority of the priests serving in this diocese in order to receive their input and advice. I asked for this meeting based on the recent announcement by the Governor regarding the State’s recommendations and the recommendations of the CDC. This meeting was followed by a meeting with members of the Priests’ Council in order to delve more deeply into the issue and discuss an appropriate response. I had further discussions with my Chancery Staff and received input from the Vicar General of the Diocese. Finally, I discussed the issue with Bishop Vetter of the Diocese of Helena, knowing that whatever determination I made needed to be similar to actions the Diocese of Helena would be making.

Based on these consultations, I determined that there was need to suspend public Masses. As such, **all public Masses in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings are to be suspended until Monday, March 30, 2020. This includes the extension of a general dispensation for all the faithful from the obligation to participate at Mass on Sunday.** My staff will continue to monitor the extent of the spread of Covid-19 (more hopefully its eradication) as the March 30 date approaches in order to make an updated determination regarding our response. I am fully aware how difficult this decision will be for people of faith. There is nothing more central to Catholics than the Eucharist. Priests will continue to offer “private” Masses for the intentions of the faithful and be available for confessions during this time.

Churches are to remain open for personal and household/family prayer, devotions, and confessions. If the parish has the practice of Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament, this practice may continue, but be restricted, or be suspended altogether according to the judgment of the pastor. Under no circumstances is the exposed Blessed Sacrament to be left unattended. If necessary, the Blessed Sacrament may be reposed in the tabernacle and adorers should be encouraged to maintain their prayer schedules as much as possible.

I recognize that I had the option of simply dispensing of the obligation to attend mass and continue to have the masses celebrated which is what I truly wanted to do, but knowing the devotion and faith of the faithful, many of them would continue to come to Mass in significant numbers beyond the guidelines set forth by government officials. Most significantly, many of these would be the most vulnerable of parishioners. In order for all the Catholic faithful to be at peace and to live without any anxiety as well as to remove any conflicted conscience of whether or not they should



Bishop’s Livestock Brand

attend mass these days, as bishop of the Diocese and out of affection for you the faithful, I made this decision so that hopefully all may remain healthy and strong.

Why have I made this decision? First of all, while there are relatively few confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Montana, I have been informed that there possibly are many more individuals infected with the Coronavirus. As has been demonstrated in other locations, infected people have unwittingly infected others. A contagious person often does not know they have been infected and are spreading the virus. The Whitehouse even made a statement that, "Over the next 15 days, Americans should not gather in groups of more than 10 people." It is a serious matter!

Secondly, there is a particular concern for those who are most vulnerable to Covid-19, i.e., individuals with chronic medical conditions and those over the age of 60. This applies not only to parishioners in general but to a number of our priests. I had considered a general dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass, but experience has shown that those who are most vulnerable (the elderly) will attend Mass regardless. The priests at the meeting I held expressed a general concern for the elderly and their well-being. There is also a matter of assisting health care providers. This diocese will always work for the common good. It is our goal to help level out the curve. Taking these measures hopefully will help flatten the curve in Montana so that our healthcare providers will not be overwhelmed.

There are many unknowns about this disease and this pandemic. As such, it is important for me as shepherd to do what is sure and certain. Taking into account that large gatherings are a factor in the spread of this disease, we need to eliminate large gatherings. Therefore, I am mandating the following steps:

- All public Masses in the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings are to be suspended until Monday, March 30, 2020. This includes the extension of the dispensation for all the faithful from the obligation to participate at Mass on Sunday.
- Priests are encouraged to solicit assistance from the laity to **live-stream Masses** in the absence of the faithful but celebrated in the parish, using social media. This can be done with a smartphone with access to the internet. If not, the Mass could be recorded (again on a smartphone) and then later uploaded to the parish website or posted for viewing online. Parishioners, of course, could be encouraged to watch Mass on the internet or television.
- The faithful are also encouraged to celebrate Sunday as a domestic church by taking time to pray together as a household. In addition to making a Spiritual Communion, praying a rosary, Chaplet of Divine Mercy, and particularly our recommended Prayer to Mary, Health of the Sick.
- Churches should remain open during this time and be available for parishioners to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, ideally exposed. Social spacing must be a consideration. The following prayer may be used:

*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 into 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.*

- General penance services are to be cancelled. Priests should, however, provide additional time and opportunity in their schedules for parishioners to confess individually. When celebrated individually, proper social distancing should be observed as much as possible. This would seem to favor anonymous confession through the screen. For face-to-face confessions, consideration should be given to moving the chair for the penitent approximately six feet from the confessor, even if this would necessitate using a different room than normally used for confession.
- **Holy Communion** may still be administered by clergy and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, and anointing of the sick may still be administered by priests to those seriously ill or in danger of death, but always following the proper protocols for handwashing and use of masks by those infected and those who are ministering.
- Funerals may yet be celebrated but only with members of the immediate family present. Another consideration is to postpone all funerals.
- If baptisms have been scheduled, they should be rescheduled until after Easter Sunday.
- **Public celebrations** of the Liturgy of the Hours, Stations of the Cross, in-person Bible study groups (or other devotional gatherings) are suspended until the public celebration of Mass resumes. All parish meetings and gatherings of any sort likewise are cancelled.
- Parishioners should consider making their weekly contributions to the parish electronically or by mail. Parishes of the Diocese will continue their ministries now and beyond this temporary suspension and will continue to pay the salaries of those who work at our parishes and schools.
- All Catholic schools and Religious Education programs are closed in harmony with the Governor's closing of all public schools.
- A publicly celebrated Chrism Mass is cancelled. Only near-by priests will be invited to attend a private celebration. The oils of catechumens and the sick will be blessed and the oil of Chrism consecrated. They will then be transported to each Vicar Forane for distribution to the pastors of each Vicariate. The Day of Prayer scheduled prior to the Chrism Mass is cancelled as are all in person priest meetings scheduled for that week.

Please look to our diocesan Facebook page and our website for additional information.

Know that you are in my prayers as we face this difficult situation. Please keep me in yours.

In Christ,



Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings