

MEMO

Date: April 18, 2020
To: Priests of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings
Fr: Bishop Warfel
Re: Miscellaneous

There was a priest's council meeting yesterday at which the members shared what was going on in their respective parishes during this shut down of normal parish activities. I was impressed by the efforts of priests to reach out in concrete ways to parishioners. Discussion also included some suggestions about allowing additional innovated approaches to provide parishioners a limited access to a Mass. After I had some time to reflect on these, I judge it best to maintain what originally was determined.

All public Masses, including weekday Masses, continue to be suspended until I have determined it to be relatively safe for people to gather. This depends much on the guidance provided by the Governor and his health care advisors. I know from a direct phone call conversation with Governor Bullock that he is paying close attention to what may be allowed with regard to removing restrictions for gathering. He has had to balance this with concerns over a potential greater spread of the coronavirus throughout Montana.

I have received multiple recommendations from priests as well as pleas from parishioners to open up Mass attendance. I appreciate the importance people place on reception of Holy Communion. I have likewise receive urging from other priests who have asked me to stay the course as well as my own diocesan staff. I judge that it is important that all parishes be on the same page in this response. If one parish goes off on its own, it surfaces questions among people as to why one parish can do one thing while another cannot. Granted, not all situations are the same. A rural parish in a county that has no confirmed cases of Covid 19 is different than Great Falls in Cascade county in which there have been 13 cases with one death.

Some priests, with good intentions, have expanded beyond the initial directive I sent out earlier and have allowed parishioners to attend weekday Masses. Others, also with good intentions, have suggested innovative approaches to provide to provide some access to participation in a Mass. Some of these innovative ways have been reported from other dioceses. Also, some priests have observed what some Protestant and Evangelical churches have done. I believe, for the over good of the diocese, all parishes need to be in union in following the directives I had sent out earlier and until rescinded. It is my hope, based on Governor Bullock's most recent remarks, that we will return to public Masses in the near future. Until then, public Masses continue to be suspended and the general dispensation for all the faithful from the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday continues.

I do ask that all priests to say a privately celebrated Mass each day for their parishioners and for an end to the pandemic caused by the coronavirus. Please include those who have died as a result. These Masses may and should include a few others in attendance to fulfill specific roles such as a server, a deacon, a reader, etc. but the number should be kept to 10 or under and must maintain adequate spacing. If it is a live streamed Mass on a Sunday, there should be a musician.

The annual priest's retreat scheduled for May has been cancelled. Hopefully, one will be able to be scheduled for the future, possibly in the Fall.

Given that I had planned to celebrate the Chrism Mass during this retreat, I will now celebrate the Chrism Mass privately with a small gathering. After packing the blessed and consecrated oils, I will transport them myself to all the parishes.

Transcript from Governor Bullock's press conference

When COVID-19 first came to Montana, we took quick and aggressive measures to slow the spread and keep Montanans home during this critical period.

We've bought time for our health care workers and first responders on the front lines and kept hospitals, especially in our rural areas, from becoming overwhelmed. We've worked to protect our vulnerable populations and remove as many people from the chain of transmission as possible to reduce infections and save lives.

We have flattened the curve and we have saved lives.

Because we acted early with input from public health and emergency response experts, Montana has a significantly lower rate of infection per capita than many of states that did not act as aggressively.

Yesterday, President Trump convened a call with the nation's governors and laid out guidelines on reopening the economy. On that call, the President told us that we governors will call the shots in our own states.

First, I want to say thank you, Mr. President, for recognizing that every state is different. Here in Montana, we've been able to keep our relatively cases low, because we know what is best for our state and because we care about our neighbors.

Over this past month, Montanans have demonstrated their individual independence and strong sense of community once again. Montanans have protected their family and friends by communicating virtually. They have stayed home while finding ways to support local restaurants

and other businesses providing take out or delivery services. Many business owners and entrepreneurs have shifted their efforts to producing 3D masks or producing hand sanitizer to help fight this virus.

These efforts have not been for nothing. Together, we are not only saving lives, but also making it so that we will be able to reopen our state and get our economy thriving again, long before many other states will be able to.

I know Montanans are hurting financially. We all want to get Montanans working again.

So we are taking steps to get there. For over a week, I have been working with public health experts and business leaders to determine how we can open our state up, while keeping people safe and avoiding a new outbreak or becoming the next hotspot in our region.

This week, I announced the creation of the Coronavirus Relief Fund Task Force to help sustain Montanans through the pandemic and to put the state on a path to economic recovery.

Montana will receive \$1.25 billion dollars to respond to this crisis and support Montanans who need it most — small businesses, workers, tribal communities, non-profits, and state and local governments.

Over the next couple of weeks, the Task Force will examine sectors of the economy to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on Montanans, consider the unique needs of each region of the state, and provide guidance on how to best utilize these funds to address the immediate needs of Montanans and with an eye towards an immediate and long-term path to economic recovery.

More than just how to spend money from the federal government, we have been working on how Montanans can be earning and spending their own money. Montana's Adjutant General Quinn is leading a process based on military strategic planning principles to look at when and how Montana can safely take steps to reopen. The process includes the expertise of public health, emergency response, local providers, and business and industry leaders.

But let me be clear: Montana's stay at home directive is in effect through April 24 and will stay in effect through April 24. After April 24, we will move forward with a phased reopening.

We all need to understand this will be a gradual process. Because once we begin to reopen, we want to be able to stay open.

Our new normal is going to look different. This virus isn't going away and we are going to have to continue to adapt with how we live with it for the next while.

By next week, we will have a deliberate plan for reopening, but that will also include thoughtful planning in the event we face any setbacks. This will be a phased reopening.

Like the President said yesterday, this is going to be a process. There are several factors that we are taking into consideration. Some of these metrics President Trump laid out himself yesterday and some of them are unique to Montana.

First, there must be a sustained reduction of new cases for at least 14 days. This is important because 14 days is the incubation period of the virus. We have been tracking our cases closely in Montana. Last week we saw a decline in new positives, and I am hopeful and confident we will see a decline this week as well.

Second, we need to make sure our hospitals are able to safely treat all patients — both COVID-19 and with other conditions — especially in our rural areas.

Third, we need to make sure we have the capacity to test all people with COVID-19 symptoms and the capacity for our state and local public health officials to conduct active monitoring of newly confirmed cases and their contacts.

While our state lab has been able to sufficiently perform testing, we will need to ramp up our testing capacity further. We still, at times, have shortages with swabs and reagents, which impacts our capacity to test on the ground.

We are working on it, but as every governor will tell you, we need the federal government to work with us, not compete with us.

Yesterday, governors across the country — both Democrat and Republican — voiced concern about testing to the President and his administration. I brought up a specific need we have here in Montana as we wait on the test kits to actually be able to perform testing using the fast-testing Abbott machines we have in stock. The President assured me that he would get us the test kits that we need.

I hope that he delivers, and I will be working my hardest to make sure of that. But let's be honest: we've heard a lot of promises from Washington that haven't always completely materialized.

Finally, we want to reopen in a way that works for our businesses, our public health community, and main streets. We want to do it in the way, so they have sufficient time to be plan for what reopening looks like and that they are prepared.

Again, I want to open things up as much as any Montanan. That's why we have already begun a process to do so. But we will do it responsibly and in phases in order to ensure we keep the curve flattened, so that we can mitigate the risk knowing the risk is still there.

We will do it in a way that will protect Montanans' lives and the recovery of our economy. And we will continue to do this the Montana way — based on the data and science on the ground here, not based on politics.

I know this crisis is hurting Montanans — but I also know that if we get this wrong, it will hurt us even more.

In times of crisis, Montanans have always pulled together. That's how we've slowed the spread, protected our nurses and doctors, and saved lives.

Thank you for your comments to my office and for sharing your thoughts on how we can begin to reopen our economy while continuing to protect the health of all Montanans.

We need to keep working together, keep taking care of our neighbors, and keep doing what's best for Montana.

Sincerely,

STEVE BULLOCK
Governor