



DIOCESE OF SAINT JOHN
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Office of the Bishop

March 31, 2020

Dear Faithful of the Diocese of Saint John,

As of today, March 31, 2020, out of an abundance of care and concern for the health and well-being of all the faithful within our diocese, and for the prevention of the spread of the coronavirus, all churches in the Diocese of Saint John will be closed, even for private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, until further notice.

This decision is not being taken lightly. I realize that not everyone will agree with this decision, especially since you, Christ's faithful, have already been deprived of the Eucharist for a few weeks now. This decision has come about through prayer, consultation, and great turmoil. Some priests have even told me that they have wept for their people who are now longing and hungering for the Eucharist. I too, as the shepherd of your diocese, grieve along with you, and with them. Some of you have shared with me that this time of fasting from the Eucharist has made you keenly aware of how much you have taken this awesome gift for granted. This is a true sign of hope, that the flame of faith, given to you in baptism, is still alive and growing within you.

I have a sense that when it is safe to do so and we return to the public celebration of the Eucharist, there will be a resurgence of devotion and belief in the Real Presence, and it will usher in a time of renewal for our Church. This is why I look forward, with great anticipation, to the earliest possible lifting of the restrictions on our public expressions of faith and of a joyous celebration of the Chrism Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, which I expect the clergy, religious and lay faithful to attend in large numbers.

In the meantime it is important for you to know that the Church is here for you and that your pastors truly care about your physical and spiritual well-being. I have urged the priests of the diocese to continue to celebrate Mass on a daily basis, even when it is not possible for the people to be present, to pray the Liturgy of the Hours and to spend time daily before the Blessed Sacrament in prayer for the people we serve.

Let us make every effort to find new and innovative ways to reach out to one another in this time, through phone calls, social media or by other means. I encourage you to continue to develop and strengthen the domestic church, your family, through devotions and prayer within your home. Let us intensify our prayer, lifting our voices in supplication to God our providential Father for all those who are afflicted at home and abroad, those who have died, those who are on the front lines caring for the sick, for our leaders, and for all who are anxious and face difficulties as a result of the impact this virus is having on our communities and families. Reach out to those who are vulnerable, our elderly sisters and brothers and those who are at an increased risk because of their frailty. Our parishes are continuing their outreach to the needy through such organizations as St. Vincent de Paul or in conjunction with local food banks. Your donations of canned goods and other necessities as well as ongoing financial contributions to the parishes to continue our mission is much appreciated.

We are approaching the most sacred time of the year. Due to the current pandemic, the liturgical celebration of the paschal mysteries of Holy Week, the Triduum and Easter will be celebrated privately, without the physical participation of the faithful. Some of our parishes that have the technology will be livestreaming their liturgies. Please check with your parishes to see what is planned. Thanks to the generosity of one of our neighbouring parishes, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception will be equipped for the livestreaming of our Triduum and Easter Sunday liturgies. I will be presiding next week at the Holy Thursday, 7:30 p.m., Good Friday, 3:00 p.m., Easter Vigil, 7:30 p.m. and Easter Sunday, 10 a.m. liturgies. Please check our website and public Diocesan Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/Diocese-of-Saint-John-108332564142619/>) for regular updates on these and other ways that we are remaining connected with you, the faithful of the diocese.

Some have inquired about the celebrations of the Sacrament of Confirmation. These are being postponed for the time being, and we may consider doing regional celebrations once churches reopen for public worship. Our priests are available for the individual celebration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and Reconciliation when this is feasible, and using every possible precaution to maintain physical distancing. The reality, however, is that any individual encounter for the Sacrament of Reconciliation has to be in relatively close proximity. In light of this dilemma, Pope Francis recently gave instructions through the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Sacrament of Reconciliation in the current pandemic, on March 20, 2020 where it was stated that when the celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is difficult and "where the individual faithful find themselves in the painful impossibility of receiving sacramental absolution, it should be remembered that perfect contrition, coming from the love of God, beloved above all things, expressed by a sincere request for forgiveness (that which the penitent is at present able to express) and accompanied by... the firm resolution to have recourse, as soon as possible, to sacramental confession, obtains forgiveness of sins, even mortal ones (cf. CCC, no. 1452). In other words, if we cannot go to Confession, it will suffice for the moment to pray the Act of Contrition confessing our sins to God out of love for him with a sincere desire for forgiveness, the intention to avoid sin and to commit to participate in the Sacrament of Reconciliation as soon as possible when conditions allow. God is just and merciful. He forgives our sins.

I encourage you to reach out to your pastor, and other priests you know, to pray with them and for them. Like you, they too are suffering. Also in this time, in your charity, please pray for me. As I am grieving with you in these difficult times, I also eagerly anticipate reopening our churches to the public celebration of the Eucharist, and to the gathering of the faithful once again within our communities.

May Our Blessed Mother intercede with her Son for us in this moment of tribulation and obtain for us relief from COVID-19 as soon as possible.

God's blessings on you,



✠ Christian Riesbeck, CC
Bishop of Saint John