

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

After much prayer and consultation with members of my staff, and in light of the latest recommendations from state and federal health authorities for slowing the rapid spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) and protecting the people of our communities, I have made the difficult decision to suspend all public weekday and weekend Masses in the Diocese of Saint Cloud, effective immediately through Easter Monday, April 13. All Catholics in the diocese remain dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass during this time.

Further:

I will celebrate the Chrism Mass privately with the deans. They will distribute the holy oils to the parishes in their deaneries at a later time. We hope to livestream the Mass on our diocesan Facebook page.

Baptisms should be rescheduled. If a wedding needs to take place, a dispensation needs to be granted by the bishop.

Funeral Masses during this time are prohibited; only graveside services are allowed. A memorial Mass should be scheduled for a later date after April 13.

Confirmations during this time period remain cancelled. My office will contact parishes to reschedule.

All public Holy Week liturgies, including Good Friday services, are cancelled. For specific details regarding liturgies, pastors should consult the "Liturgical Guidelines During the Time of Suspension of Masses" provided by the diocesan Office of Worship.

Our churches will remain open for prayer and the sacrament of reconciliation on a schedule determined by the pastor. Social distancing should be encouraged — at least 6 feet between people in prayer and/or waiting to receive the sacrament.

All parish events of 50 people or more should be cancelled, per the guidelines of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This includes parish breakfasts and fish fries; drive-through and pick-up options only are acceptable.

People who are at a higher risk for contracting the illness — the elderly and those with underlying health conditions — should avoid gatherings of 10 or more people.

If any changes to this approach are warranted in the next few weeks, I will notify pastors.

While the threat in your community may not be readily visible, it is very real. I believe these steps are necessary during this national emergency to protect human life and uphold the common good — two foundational principles of Catholic social teaching. While it may seem counterintuitive, we stay in solidarity with one another at this time by staying apart. This outbreak has caused much fear and anxiety, and I share those same feelings. I haven't experienced anything like this in my 50 years of priesthood. But we can take comfort in knowing that Jesus never leaves our side. He offers us the grace we need to make our way through this present challenge. "Take courage," he reminds us. "It is I; do not be afraid" (Matthew 14:27).

The measures we are taking don't mean that we will stop providing pastoral care. My staff and I are committed to helping our parishes and the people of our diocese navigate through this crisis. It will require everyone — diocesan staff, pastors, lay staff and volunteers, parishioners of all ages — to be creative in how we might offer alternative prayer and faith enrichment opportunities, particularly during Holy Week. We must work to make Christ present in other ways in our homes and through our charitable efforts.

I encourage you — individually or as a family — to read and pray over the Sunday Scripture readings and watch our diocesan TV Mass. It is available online at <http://worship.stcdio.org/tv-mass>, where you will also find a list of channels on which it airs. My staff is working on additional prayer and faith formation opportunities that could be offered online during this holy season. These will be publicized in various ways, including on the diocesan website: www.stcdio.org.

I ask that you also take time to check in — by phone, email or social media — with family members, friends and neighbors, particularly those who are most vulnerable, to ensure they are well and have what they need. Please also continue to support your parish financially during this time. Parishes rely on your generosity to support their staff and ministries, and they need this support now more than ever.

Finally, please join me in praying for all those affected by this pandemic — those who are ill, their caregivers, health care workers, and public officials. We will get through this by patiently making sacrifices, loving our neighbor, and staying close to Christ in prayer. May this time without the celebration of the Eucharist instill in us an even greater appreciation for those times when we will again be gathered, nourished and sent.

I share with you the prayer that Archbishop Jose Gomez, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, recently shared, seeking the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe:

*Holy Virgin of Guadalupe,
Queen of the Angels and Mother of the Americas.
We fly to you today as your beloved children.
We ask you to intercede for us with your Son,
as you did at the wedding in Cana.
Pray for us, loving Mother,
and gain for our nation and world,
and for all our families and loved ones,
the protection of your holy angels,
that we may be spared the worst of this illness.
For those already afflicted,
we ask you to obtain the grace of healing and deliverance.
Hear the cries of those who are vulnerable and fearful,
wipe away their tears and help them to trust.
In this time of trial and testing,
teach all of us in the Church to love one another and to be patient and kind.
Help us to bring the peace of Jesus to our land and to our hearts.
We come to you with confidence,
knowing that you truly are our compassionate mother,
health of the sick and cause of our joy.
Shelter us under the mantle of your protection,
keep us in the embrace of your arms,
help us always to know the love of your Son, Jesus. Amen.*

Sincerely yours in Christ,
+Donald J. Kettler
Bishop of Saint Cloud