

March 17, 2020

Bishop Mark L. Bartchak today announced the suspension of the celebration of all public Masses and all other liturgical celebrations in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown effective immediately (March 17, 2020) and continuing until further notice. Throughout this time, the dispensed obligation to attend Sunday and Holy Day Masses, granted by the Bishop on March 12, remains in effect.

During this period, churches will continue to be open for private prayer, and the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown will continue to broadcast the Sunday Mass on television. A Liturgy will air every Sunday at 11:00 a.m. on WATM ABC 23. The Mass will also be posted on the diocesan website and Facebook and Twitter social media platforms.

Funeral Masses and scheduled Weddings and Baptisms will continue to be celebrated at parishes, but attendance must be limited to immediate family members. Other activities such as Stations of the Cross, novenas, missions, and Communal Penance Services will not take place. The faithful may contact their parish for information about individual Confessions. All other diocesan or parish social activities, including fish lunches or dinners in any form (including take-out), are discontinued immediately.

“The decision to suspend all public Masses is not a decision that I take lightly,” assured Bishop Bartchak. “I realize that the faithful will deeply miss participating in Mass and receiving Jesus Christ, present in the Holy Eucharist. However, I cannot ignore the very important recommendations from public health officials during this unprecedented health emergency. All of us have an obligation to take the necessary steps to reduce the spread of the coronavirus, and that includes the Church.”

The Bishop is aware that liturgical celebrations regularly occur during the Easter season, including the Sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Communion. These celebrations are being postponed for as long as is necessary due to the impact of the coronavirus in our area. The sacraments will be celebrated as soon as conditions allow, keeping in mind the health and safety of everyone.

All of these actions have been taken after personal and direct consultation with the bishop’s chief advisors, including the lay administrative staff and deans who coordinate activities in the five regions of the diocese.

Liturgical Directives During this Special Time of Need

The following directives were communicated to the clergy of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown on March 17, 2020. The directives remain in effect until further notice. If questions arise concerning the impact of these directives, please contact your pastor for further assistance.

BISHOP SUSPENDS THE CELEBRATION OF ALL PUBLIC MASSES

Christian Initiation of Adults

Because this crisis is coming at the very time when the Christian Initiation of Adults would reach its apex, the rites regarding the reception of adults into the Church will be suspended until after the crisis has passed. These rites may then be celebrated at parish weekend liturgies once weekend Masses have been restored.

Easter Triduum

Because it seems unlikely that public Masses will be permitted until after Easter, priests should begin making arrangements for the private celebration of the liturgies associated with the Easter Triduum. It would be advisable for materials to be placed near the entrances of churches so that the faithful can take these home and participate in some way in these important liturgies. Priests should retain and make use of the existing paschal candle as well as the oils blessed last year. The Bishop will authorize new Paschal candles to be blessed and holy oils to be distributed once restrictions have been lifted.

Baptisms

Baptisms of children and adults may be held during the restricted period, but they should be limited to members of the immediate family only.

Confirmations

All currently scheduled confirmation Masses have been postponed. The Bishop plans to reschedule confirmations after the crisis has passed. These confirmations will most likely occur in a specific location in each of the five deaneries. In order to accommodate the greatest number of people, multiple confirmation liturgies in some deaneries may need to be scheduled.

First Holy Communion

First communion liturgies should be postponed until after the crisis has ended.

The Sacrament of Penance

In terms of the celebration of penance, the Bishop requires that all penance services be canceled until after current restrictions on crowd size have been lifted. He encourages priests to offer specific times when the faithful can come for individual confessions. Priests should make use of the confessional barrier between themselves and the penitents, and provide ways for surfaces in the confessional to be disinfected after each penitent, if possible. Should the crisis escalate to the point where there is a grave danger of death for many, the bishop will authorize the use of general absolution. Priests will be made aware of this if the necessity arises. In the meantime, the ordinary form of the sacrament of penance should be observed.

Weddings

Priests and deacons are encouraged to contact couples who are planning weddings in the next several months to determine if these plans have been altered. It is possible, and even likely, that venue changes and cancelations may already have affected couples with scheduled weddings. Because most weddings are not scheduled earlier than mid-April, it should be possible to give more accurate guidance in the next couple of weeks.

Funerals

Funerals may continue to be celebrated but only for immediate family members. The time of the Mass should not be published. It is acceptable for families who wish to avoid coming to a parish church to have a funeral liturgy outside of Mass celebrated at the funeral home. Vigils should be conducted at the discretion of the families and funeral directors in keeping with the requirements of public safety.

Pastoral Care of the Sick

The Bishop directs that priests and deacons follow these protocols with regard to the visitation and pastoral care of the sick. Those who are hospitalized should continue to receive visitation and sacraments as

permitted by hospital policy. Thus priests and deacons who serve as hospital chaplains and in emergent coverage should continue these functions. Priests and deacons should visit parishioners in nursing facilities and rehab units only in danger of death. Similarly, priests and deacons should visit parishioners in their private homes only in danger of death.

Pastoral Care in General

Priests and deacons should continue to meet on a one-to-one basis with parishioners for appointments and pastoral counseling. The Diocesan Pastoral Center will be closed for two weeks or until the current situation abates. Email and phone calls will be answered remotely. Similarly, Catholic Charities will be closed but it is possible to leave messages for Catholic Charities staff.

Graduations

Until the Diocesan Education Office receives instruction from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, all graduations are temporarily postponed.

Social Gatherings

By direct order of the Bishop, all social gatherings are prohibited until further notice. This includes parish gatherings, meetings of parish groups, fish fries, and other fundraisers. These measures are required in order to avoid person-to-person contact and the spread of CO VID-19. Furthermore, because it is impossible to observe the necessary sterile procedures and because of the possibility of gatherings of people in excess of what is required for public safety, all takeout meals for fundraising must also be suspended immediately.

Each bishop is responsible for making decisions for the good of his diocese. Bishop Bartchak has consulted with all of the bishops in Pennsylvania, who are taking similar steps within their own dioceses. In addition to these steps that impact parishes, the Bishop has also directed that all diocesan offices be closed for at least the next two weeks.

"I am also following the example of Pope Francis, who authorized the same measures for the Church in Rome and throughout Italy, while still keeping

himself available to the people through the daily broadcast of his private Mass,” Bishop Bartchak said.

For more information and regular updates on the changes impacting the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, please visit the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown’s *Proclaim!* e-news site at proclaim.dioceseaj.org, or the diocesan website or Facebook and Twitter social media sites. The faithful are also invited to sign up for text message alerts by texting `daj` to 84576.