



Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown

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A Message from Bishop Mark to all the People of the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown

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I had the opportunity to spend some time with a group of 5th graders. We reviewed the Bible story when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for Passover; just before his crucifixion. It was getting close to Easter, so the 5th graders immediately thought of Palm Sunday. I shared with them what it says in the Gospel of John in Chap 12. V. 22: Among those who had come up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. They approached Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee and made this request: "Sir, we would like to see Jesus."

After reading the rest of that Gospel passage, one boy in the group raised his hand and said, "I have a question. What happened to those Greeks? It doesn't say if they got to see Jesus!" I explained that it wasn't their time to see Jesus at that moment, but eventually, everyone would have that opportunity. The conversation with the 5th graders turned to a lively discussion of how they thought it would be awesome to see Jesus!

A few weeks ago, during Holy Week, one person wrote me about closed churches; not being at Sunday Mass; not receiving the Holy Eucharist; and not being with other parishioners. Then he wrote: "We would like to see Jesus."

Scripture scholars tell us that this request did not express some casual interest. It means, "We have a great desire to see Jesus;" not just have a glimpse of him, but to encounter him; to draw near to him; to be with him, and allow him to be with us.

The living and real presence of the Lord Jesus in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is at the heart of our Catholic faith. To go into a parish church before the tabernacle is an expression of what it means for each of us; that we would like to see Jesus. It is a great desire.

And that desire extends to the whole sacramental life of the Church, because we draw near and encounter the Lord Jesus in the celebration of Mass and in all the sacraments. A close second to the requests I have received is for the sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation to be made available since it was practically unavailable during Lent this year.

The closing of churches and suspension of the public celebration of Mass and the sacraments were necessary precautions taken for the health and safety of everyone. But the opportunity has come to begin reopening our churches and restore sacramental life in stages.

In order for this reopening to be successful, I am requesting and urging that all of you, the faithful Catholic people of our diocese, will continue to abide by the directives in place to combat the spread of COVID-19. These directives include frequent hand washing, disinfecting, physical distancing, wearing a mask, and abiding by limits on occupancy in places where people wish to gather.

I hope that you will be careful and thoughtful in your determination about returning to church for personal prayer and the sacraments. In particular, I urge you to think about others and not just your own needs and desires.

Remember that the clergy and laity should be able to visit to your home. So, those who are currently sick or are at greater danger from the coronavirus need to refrain from coming to the churches at this time. Ask the clergy to come to you.

I have asked parish pastors and administrators to develop individual plans for reopening the churches which include limitations on the number of people who may be in the church at any one time. There must also be a schedule for daily cleaning and frequent disinfecting, and appropriate measures to keep everyone safe who would like to come to church.

I am relying on their good pastoral judgment. I am also authorizing pastors and administrators to use church social halls or other locations for the daily reservation of the Blessed Sacrament and personal prayer if this permits easier physical distancing and appropriate disinfecting.

In this step-by-step reopening, we may have to adjust certain things as we go forward together. Directives have been sent to all the priests and deacons in our diocese. Here is the basic plan.

First, the churches will be open for personal prayer. Mass and the other sacraments will continue to be celebrated privately. When churches are open for prayer, there will be seating restrictions to provide for safe distances.

Next, priests in each deanery will develop a plan for the celebration of the sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation. I am grateful to the pastors and the ingenuity of laypersons in creating the necessary screens to safeguard against transmission of the Coronavirus while allowing for the appropriate interaction for the sacrament.

I have asked and urged all the priests to assist in being available to hear confessions not only in their own parish church, but throughout their area. I have also directed the priests to arrange for the sacrament of Penance/Reconciliation to be available at different times

(morning, afternoon, evening) during the day. I plan to assist in hearing confessions at different times and places around the diocese.

After the churches have reopened for private prayer, I am also hopeful that we will be able to put in place a system for distributing Holy Communion outside of Mass. Ideally, you would be able to join in a Mass either on TV, live-streamed, or recorded, and then you would come to the church to receive Holy Communion according to a system determined by the parish priest.

This method will reduce physical contact between parishioners and keep church cleaning and disinfecting to a reasonable level. Even though there are restrictions on occupancy and requirements for frequent disinfecting, Holy Communion will still be available to everyone.

Another step along the way will be restoring public daily Masses. This step will require some alterations in the way priests celebrate Mass. For instance, priests will need to be sure that hosts consecrated for distribution to faithful are kept under appropriate cover and priests will need to take special precautions in distributing Communion.

Likewise, we will continue to abstain from shaking hands or hugging at the sign of peace, and Holy Communion will be available under the form of bread only. Singing and the length of Masses will probably need to be reduced.

Offertory collections and offertory processions will also pose challenges, due to the potential of passing on the virus through contact with envelopes, baskets, and the bread and wine presented at Mass. Ongoing guidance and direction will be given as we go forward.

Because of the restrictions which will continue to be in place to battle COVID-19 in months ahead, it is conceivable that it may be quite some time before regular weekend Masses are restored, at least for some parishes.

Dealing with this difficulty will likely result in people attending Mass on another day or at a time that may be different or unique. It may require using weekday Masses, assigned Mass times, or other systems as a way to allow the participation of everyone. Please be patient with these efforts, burdensome as they might be.

Baptisms, weddings, and funerals may be celebrated, but the requirements of masking, distancing, and limiting occupancy remain in effect. I am relying on the good pastoral judgment of pastors and administrators in dealing with these celebrations.

The process of Christian Initiation of Adults will hopefully continue once we are able to begin celebrating public Masses. It will be up to each pastor or administrator to work out a course of action with catechumens/elect and candidates for celebrating the sacraments of initiation.

It will also be necessary to adapt the way in which First Holy Communion is celebrated. It is likely to happen that children will receive as part of a smaller group. Parishes with larger numbers of candidates may have to schedule multiple First Communion Masses to which limited numbers are invited.

The sacrament of Confirmation will also have to be celebrated in a different way for the time being. Because it is impossible for me to have large gatherings at the cathedrals or other churches, I plan to delegate pastors and priest-administrators to celebrate the sacrament of Confirmation this year. Depending upon the number of candidates and the restricted number of people permitted in the churches, multiple celebrations may have to be scheduled.

Finally, I am aware that having Masses out of doors may allow larger crowds and easier cleaning and disinfecting by parishes, especially if those who attend bring their own chairs. Physical distancing will have to be observed as such celebrations. Contingency plans will be needed in case of rain, but I am hopeful that a number of areas in the diocese may be able to celebrate Mass for larger crowds as the weather and other circumstances permit.

The group of 5th graders thought it would be awesome to see Jesus; to be close to him; to welcome him; and receive him into their lives. That closeness of the Lord Jesus is what the sacraments are all about. They are Christ's gift of himself to us.

In response, Jesus asks us not only to join him in worship of our heavenly Father, but in seeking to see Jesus and to find Jesus in others, especially the poor, the infirm, the weak, the sick, the dying, and in each other who are ordinary people like 5th graders.

That young group grasped what a sacramental encounter is all about. The Church established by the Lord Jesus is also a sacrament. Remind yourselves every day that you and I and all of us together are outward signs of God's grace; the remedy for sin, and sickness, and suffering.

Thank you for your attention and cooperation in this time of need. If you have an idea about something not included in this overall approach, I ask you to share it with the parish priest or someone delegated for some these adaptations. Please do so in charity and I ask everyone in all that we do to be patient and supportive of one another.

I look forward to seeing you and seeing Jesus in you as we journey forward together.

With prayers and best wishes,

Bishop +Mark