

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It seems that every minute there are some new headlines related to the coronavirus. We're all trying to process changes and adjustments rapidly being made around us.

In the Church, we're doing the same. We're attentive to the value of gathering as a faith community, especially during this critical time when we need to pray for God's healing and deliverance. At the same time, we're also mindful of the responsibility to care for those around us, especially the sick and infirm, by the choices we make. If some sacrifice is involved, then we joyfully offer that sacrifice. Perhaps it's providential that we're able to focus on this theme of sacrifice during the season of Lent.

Until further notice, Bishop Knestout has granted a dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days to the following persons most susceptible to the effects of the coronavirus/COVID-19: **those 60 years of age or older; those with chronic illness; and those with immune system deficiencies**. The dispensation is also extended to those caring for people who are presently ill or who assist those in the three groups indicated.

While nothing can replace attendance at Mass and receiving Holy Communion, those already dispensed because of illness or (in addition) for the reasons given above have not committed a mortal sin. Those who refrain from attending Mass should, if possible, devote an hour to prayer on Sunday, observe Mass on television or on-line, or by praying the Rosary of some of the *Liturgy of the Hours*. Keeping the Lord's Day holy in these ways demonstrates a genuine desire for holiness and a sincerity of heart.

Those exempted should check regularly with their parish or on the diocesan website for updates in the present health emergency.

In addition, Bishop Knestout sent out instructions yesterday related to our liturgical celebrations. Based on those, effective immediately, we will:

- Distribute the Eucharist under **only one species, the consecrated host**. Jesus makes Himself truly present, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, in each species, and receiving Him only in the consecrated host **does not diminish** our complete reception of our Savior.
- Restrict the sharing of the sign of peace. In the Roman Missal, the celebrant is instructed to invite all those at Mass to extend the sign of peace to those around them with this caveat: "if appropriate." At this time, I judge this expression to be **inappropriate**, so for now, we will

**immediately begin singing or saying the "Lamb of God" at that moment.** Sharing the sign of peace is a valuable and important part of our liturgy, and I hope we will be able to restore it soon.

- **Refrain from holding hands** with those around us during the Lord's Prayer.
- **Remove holy water** from the baptismal font and from holy water fonts.

At Sacred Heart Catholic Church, we are also implementing these precautions and actions:

- For now, we will **suspend service of food and drink, including coffee, after Masses.** I hope that you will remain for conversation with fellow parishioners, and hopefully we can resume hospitality soon.
- As a precaution, we have **extra hand sanitizer in the commons,** in addition to those places where it was already located. These hand sanitizers have 60%-95% alcohol. I have also instructed Van Yeager, our full-time custodian, to be extra attentive to high-touch surfaces, like door knobs and handles. On a daily basis, she uses hospital-grade products (bleach, Lysol sprays, wipes, etc.) to clean the bathrooms, commons, sanctuary, nursery, and other locations on our campus. Van does an excellent job cleaning our church, and I'm confident that, even outside of times of pandemic, our building is a clean and safe place.
- I beg, plead, cajole and admonish you that, if you prefer to receive communion "on the tongue," that for the foreseeable future, you receive communion **"in the hand."** Inevitably, when you receive "on the tongue," some small amount of your saliva is transferred to the fingers of the minister, who in turn transfers it to the host which is given to the communicant in line behind you. Out of consideration for your brothers and sisters in Christ, I **strongly, strongly ask you, for now, to receive communion reverently and devoutly "in the hand."**

Other considerations:

- We've been hearing from local facilities, especially prisons and nursing homes, that they are **restricting normal access by volunteers.** This means that our ministers, including me, are unable to make regular visits, even to bring communion. In the event of some pastoral emergency, please contact the rectory or the parish office.

Here at Sacred Heart Catholic School, our students are learning to be extremely attentive to their personal hygiene.

- Massive bottles of **hand sanitizer** dot the corridors, and the students make use of it every time they walk by.
- **Field trips outside of Virginia have been suspended**, and families who travel to certain destinations for spring break may be asked to self-quarantine before they return to school.
- Our teachers and maintenance staff are ensuring that desks, classroom door knobs, and other high-touch surfaces are disinfected **before and after** students leave for the day.

The Office of Catholic Schools continues to monitor the situation and will advise our school leadership regarding any further actions which need to be taken.

In his correspondence yesterday, Bishop Knestout reminded us that "prayer is an important way Catholics respond to any crisis as we express our dependence on God. We stand in solidarity with all those impacted by the disease and ask parishioners to keep these people in mind while we pray—especially as we continue our Lenten journey." At every Mass for the foreseeable future, I'll add an intercession for the eradication of this virus, and for healing for all who are sick. I hope you'll add such an intercession to your daily prayers and private Lenten devotions as well.

The latest updates and additional information about the diocesan efforts can be found at [www.richmonddioocese.org/coronavirus](http://www.richmonddioocese.org/coronavirus). Further resources about the coronavirus (COVID-19) and preventative measures are available from the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov) and the [Virginia Department of Health](https://www.vdh.virginia.gov).

May our Good Shepherd continue to bless, protect, sustain and guide you.

In His name,  
Fr. Jonathan