

March 16, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Effective immediately, and until further notice, I have suspended the celebration of Masses open to the public and all public gatherings in all diocesan parishes, worship sites, college campuses, chapels and health care facilities in the eleven counties of the Diocese of Scranton.

Churches of the Diocese will remain open daily for individual private prayer. The timeframe for each parish is to be determined by its pastor or parish life coordinator. The dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass during this time remains in effect.

Scheduled sacramental celebrations such as weddings, baptisms or funerals will be permitted, but attendance will be limited to immediate family members and follow any guidelines established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The sacraments of the Anointing of the Sick and Reconciliation will be available, when requested individually, by the faithful in cases of serious need.

It deeply saddens me to take this temporary action, knowing the depth of your faith and your desire to celebrate the Holy Eucharist on a regular basis. In light of continued concerns surrounding COVID-19, and upon the advice of medical experts, it is clear that we, as a faith community, must do our part in order to help slow the spread of this virus.

The number of faithful souls who filled our churches this past weekend, even with the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass, was deeply consoling to me. As you always have, so many of you are turning to your faith as the surest place where we will find God's peace, consolation and hope.

Unfortunately, the presence of such great numbers of worshippers in our churches is not serving our efforts to help mitigate the spread of the Coronavirus. In an effort to prevent overwhelming our hospitals and health care facilities, national, state and local leaders have urged people to avoid large gatherings of people and keep appropriate social distancing from one another.

As your bishop, in addition to the care of souls, the safety and health of all of our faithful parishioners, friends and those we welcome through our outreach and service, is of utmost importance to me. As such, the decision that I have announced, while difficult, is the best way for us to work together to serve the common good of all, both in our parishes and in our communities.

During these challenging times, it is also crucial that we not forget who we are as Christians. May we continue to offer, in whatever way we can, care and concern for those who are most vulnerable, including the poor, our senior citizens and those who are ill. I also urge those who can do so to maintain support for your parishes during these difficult days in order to sustain the ministries and outreach services for parishioners and those most in need.

Despite the suspension of public Masses, a private Mass will be celebrated daily in the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Scranton, and made available on CTV: Catholic Television of the Diocese of Scranton. On weekdays, the Mass will be broadcast at 12:10 p.m., 3:30 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. On weekends, the Saturday Vigil Mass will be broadcast at 4:00 p.m. and rebroadcast on Sunday morning at 10:00 a.m. The Masses will also be streamed on the Diocese of Scranton's website (www.dioceseofscranton.org), made available on the Diocese of Scranton's social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) and will be accessible on the Diocese of Scranton's YouTube channel.

Additional resources for individual parishioners to deepen their faith during Lent are also available on the Diocese of Scranton's website.

During this sacred season of Lent, we are being asked to sacrifice more than ever before – particularly with the loss of cherished religious practices, most especially the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. May we do so mindful of the selfless sacrifice of Jesus and for the sake of our brothers and sisters who are most vulnerable and in need of our help.

The Diocese of Scranton continues to monitor the rapidly evolving health situation regarding the coronavirus. We are constantly monitoring directives from national, state and local officials. This policy will be reassessed on a regular basis, in addition to the plans for Holy Week and Easter.

God bless you and keep each of you in His care. Let us continue to pray for one another.

Faithfully yours in Christ,

† *Joseph C. Bambera*

Most Reverend Joseph C. Bambera, D.D., J.C.L.
Bishop of Scranton