



DIOCESE OF SAGINAW

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

March 3, 2020

To the People of God of the Diocese of Saginaw:

In light of the current situation regarding the coronavirus, I have outlined below an Instruction for the Health of the Faithful.

Introduction

On February 18th, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement addressing the Catholic response to the outbreak of the coronavirus. In part it states: “The Catholic Church in the United States stands in solidarity with those affected by the coronavirus and their families, health workers who are valiantly trying to diagnose and treat patients, and those under quarantine awaiting results of their screening for the virus. We offer our prayers for healing and support those organizations, both domestic and international, working to provide medical supplies and assistance to address this serious risk to public health.”

Since then some dioceses across the United States and in other countries are issuing policies to safeguard against the coronavirus. We will need to remain vigilant in this matter. It is also important that all people remain aware of the guidance of national, state and county health officials in order to avoid highly contagious diseases. I have supplemented this communication with information from the Saginaw Health Department and will add additional resources as needed.

There are many reasons in which a person is not able to attend Mass, including illness or care for someone who is ill. Individuals with flu-like symptoms should remain home in order to avoid the spread of their illnesses. All who are unable to attend Mass are invited to view the Cathedral Mass livestream each Sunday at 10 am on the diocesan website: <https://saginaw.org/cathedral-live>

Temporary Measures

If you are able to attend Mass, but are troubled by the possibility of getting an infection, I suggest that you bow your head to your neighbors during the sign of peace and respond “Peace be with you.” Please respect another person’s decision to not hug or shake hands. The decision not to hold hands during the Lord’s Prayer or any other part of the Mass should always be respected. At any time, an individual may choose to not receive Holy Communion from the Cup, knowing that you are receiving the fullness of Christ in the sacred host.

It is also important for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion [EMHC] to wash their hands before and after Mass. The use of a disinfectant may be beneficial. However, please do not create a new “rite” of purifying hands before the Distribution of Holy Communion.

Future additional measures may be needed. I will consult the pastors, directors of parish life, and the priest celebrants to determine **if** additional measures should be taken. For example, Communion from the Cup may be suspended for the entire congregation during a time of heightened alert. In distribution of Holy Communion, the Host would be placed in the hand without the minister touching the communicant and individuals would not receive the Host on the tongue. Blessings of non-communicants would not include touch. Holy water would be removed from baptismal and open fonts for the same period. On Good Friday, the Cross would be venerated by bow or genuflection, not by touch or kissing. An announcement will be made to the congregation to explain these and any other temporary measures **if they are determined necessary**.

Spiritual Communion

This is also an opportune time to speak about the beauty of Spiritual Communion. Spiritual Communion is an ancient practice in the Catholic Church which remains relevant, not solely for those concerned about contagious disease, but for all individuals who, due to their unique circumstances, are not able to receive Holy Communion, yet desire the Lord in the Eucharist.

The Catholic Church teaches of the rich benefit of “Spiritual Communion.” St. Thomas Aquinas¹ (1225- 1274) wrote that there are two ways to receive Holy Communion. The preeminent way is to receive the consecrated Host and/or Precious Blood of Our Lord during the Sacrifice of the Mass. St. Thomas Aquinas referred also to spiritual reception of the Blessed Sacrament, “by which one receives the effect of this sacrament, whereby a man is spiritually united with Christ through faith and charity.” St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “the effect of the sacrament can be secured by every person if he receives it [i.e. Holy Communion] in desire, though not in reality.”

While Spiritual Communion is no replacement for actual reception of the Blessed Sacrament during Mass, there are occasions in which a person is not able to attend Mass, yet truly desires to unite himself or herself most closely to the Lord. Spiritual Communion does not need a particular setting, although the person should remain quiet and in prayer, truly desiring union with Our Lord in the most intimate way. The Church teaches that this is a moment for an individual to receive grace.

Grace is a participation in the life of God. It introduces us into the intimacy of Trinitarian life: by Baptism the Christian participates in the grace of Christ, the Head of his Body. As

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologia III, Q. 80, a.1.

an "adopted son" he can henceforth call God "Father," in union with the only Son. He receives the life of the Spirit who breathes charity into him and who forms the Church.²

In the 1700's, Saint Alphonsus Liguori, ministering to the isolated people in southern Italy, offered the following prayer, which I invite you to recite in moments of Spiritual Communion:

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there, and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

In 2003, Saint John Paul II, in ¶25 of the Encyclical "A Eucharistic Church", encouraged spiritual communion before the Blessed Sacrament. He wrote:

The worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass is of inestimable value for the life of the Church. This worship is strictly linked to the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The presence of Christ under the sacred species reserved after Mass – a presence which lasts as long as the species of bread and of wine remain – derives from the celebration of the sacrifice and is directed towards communion, both sacramental and spiritual. It is the responsibility of Pastors to encourage, also by their personal witness, the practice of Eucharistic adoration, and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in particular, as well as prayer of adoration before Christ present under the Eucharistic species.

It is pleasant to spend time with him, to lie close to his breast like the Beloved Disciple (cf. *Jn* 13:25) and to feel the infinite love present in his heart. If in our time Christians must be distinguished above all by the "art of prayer," how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament? How often, dear brother and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support!

In the same document, he described Spiritual Communion in ¶34:

...it is good to *cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist*. This was the origin of the practice of "spiritual communion", which has happily been established in the Church for centuries and recommended by saints who were masters of the spiritual life. Saint Teresa of Jesus wrote: "When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you."

² Catechism of the Catholic Church, ¶1997.

Over the past several months, I have asked you to spend time with Our Lord in prayer. Our Lord draws us in spiritual communion. Developing a devotion to Our Lord will be a tremendous consolation to you if, for whatever reason, you are not able to attend Mass.

Pastoral Care and Spiritual Courage

Finally, while we remain vigilant to spread of this coronavirus, I ask that we include in our prayers

- For those who are suffering from the current outbreak of disease, and for those who have died from this disease in recent weeks.
- For those who provide care to others – those in health care, in homes caring for those who are infirm or dying, for child care providers, for all emergency workers, to name a few.
- For the priests who assist the sick and dying, that we may extend the love of Christ to those in need.

Feel free to create your own prayers to be included in the Universal Prayer.

For an additional resource I am providing a link to the Saginaw County Health Department.

<https://www.saginawpublichealth.org/page.asp?ID=3486>

With assurances of my prayers for all of you, may you experience,

Peace and joy in Christ,

+ Robert D. Gruss

Most Rev. Robert D. Gruss
Bishop of Saginaw