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**Diocese of Belleville  
Office of the Bishop**

March 17, 2020  
Feast of St. Patrick, Bishop

Dear Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious, Principals, Teachers and Diocesan and Agency Staffs:

May the Peace of Jesus Christ be with you!

*"I AM the Way, the Truth, and the Life.  
whoever believes in Me, even if he should die,  
shall have Eternal Life."*

*--Jesus of Nazareth*

Lent is the season of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving; a time of preparation for Holy Week when we meditate on the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. None of us knew on Ash Wednesday that this would be a Lent like no other, when the entire world would be engulfed by a new, potentially life-threatening illness, the coronavirus pandemic. In the United States, this illness has caused particular concern because our country seems to be lagging behind other countries in preparation for a such widespread health crisis, especially in the area of testing and hospital resources.

There is much about this virus that is unknown and the unknown can sometimes lead to fear and even panic. Some Christians are asking: Is this suffering God's will? Is it part of a Divine Plan? Could it be a punishment for sin in the world with God punishing the just along with the unjust? If Americans had a greater faith and prayed more fervently, would a miracle occur and rid the world of this scourge? Or, could this sudden event be a random act of nature with no specific theological or religious meaning? In truth, I do not know the answers to these questions. However, I am confident of this foundational Christian belief that God so loved the world that He sent His Son to be our Savior. God loves and cares for each of us in every circumstance. He accompanies all of us in the journey of life through great suffering and great joy with His compassionate mercy.

With this letter, I am giving directives to the entire Diocese that go beyond my letter of March 13, 2020. **These directives MUST BE FOLLOWED faithfully by everyone in every parish.** This means that no Pastor or Administrator has the authority to act contrary to these directives or make changes in them. The Christian Faithful in every parish should be given the same instructions to avoid the confusion that would follow if different parishes provided different guidelines.

In order to help slow the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in our community, I am now directing you to suspend all public celebrations of the Eucharist in the Diocese of Belleville effective immediately. This directive will remain in effect until personally rescinded or changed by me. Because of the rapidly changing mandates from local, state, and federal governments as well as health officials, this is necessarily an evolving situation which may require re-evaluation and adjustment in the weeks ahead. Social distancing and proper hygiene will diminish communal transmission and flatten the curve of the virus, thus sparing us the stringent requirements of “lockdown” and “sheltering in place.” (See Center for Disease Control and Prevention at <https://www.cdc.gov>).

As with my directives of March 13, 2020, concerning the Liturgy and school closure, this has been a pastorally difficult decision. I have made it only after wide consultation with the Cabinet, the Vicars Forane, the Presbyteral Council Officers, local physicians, and representatives of the laity. Still, it is depriving the People of God of the unique spiritual nourishment of the Eucharist during Lent, which is surely a painful paradox. Dire circumstances compel me to care for the safety and physical health and wellbeing of the families and individuals of our Diocese, while seeking other ways of providing spiritual nourishment. Please review the new detailed guidelines below.

**1.) MASSES:** I am dispensing all Catholics in our Diocese from the obligation of participating in the Sunday Eucharist effective immediately. It would distress me to have to cancel the Chrism Mass and the Sacred Triduum in our parishes. ~~At this point, I am not doing so.~~ However, you should know that I may have no choice but to do so, if the virus does not flatline in the coming weeks.

- All public celebrations of the Liturgy, as well as Liturgy of the Hours, Stations of the Cross, and all other group services, Bible studies, Parish School of Religion, Pre-Cana sessions, and **all other parish activities attended by more than ten people** must cease immediately. (Fish Frys may continue as take-out meals only with staffing in accord with allowable number of workers and safe distancing.)

- Priests should continue celebrating the Eucharist “*sine populo*” (without a congregation) and should include the assistance of at least one other adult minister, if possible. No more than four ministers should be gathered for this purpose. Holy Communion may still be distributed by the priest to the small group participating in a “*sine populo*” celebration of the Eucharist.

- The intentions for all Eucharists celebrated “*sine populo*” should be reassigned as “*missas pro populo*” (Masses offered for the people). Every effort should be made to reschedule the original intentions of these Eucharistic Celebrations for a future Mass, at a later date.

- Please work with your parish staff and lay members to offer live-streamed celebrations of the Eucharist where possible. A live stream can be accomplished by broadcasting the celebration of the Eucharist with a smartphone or tablet to social media streaming tools. Live-streaming from parishioners’ home parish is preferred, however, that may not be possible. Links to assist in setting up live-stream of the Eucharist are in the resources attached to this letter.

**2.) EUCHARISTIC ADORATION:** There will be no Eucharistic Adoration at parishes or institutions, unless the pastor can arrange this in such a way that there are no more than 10 people present at one time maintaining the social distancing guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

**3.) WEDDINGS/FUNERALS/BAPTISMS:** It may be best to reschedule these events, if possible. If not possible to reschedule, these important liturgies must be restricted to a small group of (10) immediate family and friends only. Often, it may be best to reschedule weddings. Some Funeral Directors are only allowing immediate families for visitations and only 10 family members at the burial. Parish pastors should determine whether to continue with baptisms. However, these must be simple, private, individual ceremonies.

4.) **SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION:** In the weeks leading up to Easter, the Faithful rightly seek the Sacrament of Reconciliation and look forward to going to confession during Lenten Penance Services, which will not be possible. In accord with Canon Law (960-963), and because of the current grave danger of transmitting the coronavirus in private confessionals (either "behind the screen" or "face to face"), I hereby authorize priests to legitimately use from the *Rite of Penance* the rite for General Absolution **during this time of crisis only.** This Rite includes sacred scripture, an explanation by the priest, a common act of contrition, the Lord's prayer and then the granting of absolution, followed by a penance. **N.B. This can ONLY be done if you can arrange a series of small services attracting no more than 10 people, who can maintain distance from one another in the church.** You could, for example, set aside a Saturday afternoon or a Sunday as "A Day of Mercy" and celebrate a modified rite several times on the same day between now and Easter. If you have a room in the church area that is large enough and provides confidentiality, you may continue one-on-one Confessions as long as you arrange chairs for priest and penitent at least 6 feet apart. (I know how awkward this sounds. But, I cannot think of another way of handling this unique situation!)

5.) **MINISTRY TO SICK AND AGED:** Holy Communion must be given in the hand to the elderly, the sick (not in nursing homes) or homebound by ministers in good health to individuals with no symptoms of the virus.

6.) **ANOINTING OF THE SICK:** The Anointing of the Sick must still be administered by priests to those seriously ill or in danger of death. However, priests administering this Sacrament must be in good health. All those administering sacraments to the elderly, sick or homebound **MUST** follow proper protocols from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for handwashing and use of masks by those infected and those who are ministering to them.

7.) **COLLECTIONS:** Pastors should not be embarrassed or ashamed to remind parishioners that their financial support remains an integral part of parish life and the continued operation of our parishes and their mission of Christian service. Please encourage the Faithful to continue giving of their time, talent, and treasure at this difficult time. Encourage them to use online giving, mail, or drop-off their Sunday Offertory at the rectory or Parish Office.

8.) **CHARITABLE GIVING:** The Diocese understands the economic impact that the current health crisis is having on so many individuals and families in our parishes as well as on our community as a whole. In times like this, it is particularly urgent for us to assist our brothers and sisters who are most in need. I encourage you to minister to your neighbors and those in need in your local communities. Please continue to work to support individuals who depend on parish charitable efforts for food and other necessities. Many Catholic people might feel a greater motivation, at this time, to support organizations that are responding to this crisis such as St. Vincent de Paul, the Catholic Urban Program, DAYSTAR, food pantries and clothing drives. Please do not neglect to encourage your parishioners to continue their needed support to the Catholic Service and Ministry Appeal.

I am deeply concerned about how each of you are doing at this time. I cannot overstress the need for you to take care of yourself. Follow hygiene rules carefully, take your temperature if you feel unwell. The body temperature of a healthy person averages 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. If yours is 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or more, talk to your doctor. Please get a sufficient amount of rest and eat a healthful diet. Take your day off. Spend time with your family, stay close to the members of your support group, even online. Confide your concerns to a true friend and set aside a particular time each day to pray and reflect. Do not overindulge in repetitious, depressing and negative news coverage of the virus. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

I am fully united with you in mind and heart as we navigate the challenges of this Brave New World. I know that these new directives will have an impact on almost every aspect of your parish. They will be disturbing and frustrating to parishioners, some of whom may react negatively. This will require greater patience and empathy with them on your part. Be patient with yourself as well. Please pray for me that I may have the wisdom and the courage needed to make difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions.

Our Lady Help of Christians, Pray for us!

*Oremus pro invicem*

Prayerfully and appreciatively yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Edward K. Braxton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.  
Bishop of Belleville