



CATHOLIC DIOCESE
of
BATON ROUGE
Office of the Bishop

To the Clergy, Religious and Faithful of the Diocese of Baton Rouge

In order to promote safety and health in public worship and to assist in alleviating undue anxiety among the faithful, especially the elderly and vulnerable, it is prudent to give an update about the coronavirus and how our community's response to its threat continues to evolve.

Governor Edwards today (March 13, 2020) issued a proclamation asking people to refrain from gatherings of more than 250 to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is our desire to cooperate with his order to continue to preserve peoples' health and well-being. It is also our desire to try to maintain as best we can our Sunday and daily Mass schedules while allowing our parishioners the freedom to make guilt-free decisions as to whether to attend Mass at their parish churches.

To this end:

1. The Catholic faithful of the Diocese of Baton Rouge are dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass beginning this weekend, March 14/15 until April 13, 2020. I specifically encourage that those who are elderly, sick, experiencing symptoms of illness, or who are at high risk of illness, not attend Mass, for your safety during this time of emergency! This dispensation should be interpreted broadly as possible to include all Catholics (even if healthy), especially those who also care for, or regularly come into contact with, those who are high risk, or if you are concerned or afraid for your personal health, or if you are even a little suspicious that you might be sick, or even if you believe you should not attend for the common good. In all these and similar cases do not attend Mass. Further dates may be added to this dispensation if there is a continued State of Emergency or if the threat of spreading the virus remains. We are not currently changing our Sunday and Daily Mass schedules in any of our parishes, but this decision is open to change by me from week to week.
2. Parishes are encouraged to discontinue all unnecessary gatherings of parishioners and to consider cancelling large social events like parish festivals, missions and seated meals.
3. Pursuant to the Governor of Louisiana's order closing public schools in the State Louisiana beginning March 16 until April 13, we have decided that all Catholic schools in the Diocese of Baton Rouge follow the same school closure schedule in light of the Governor's directive. Again, further directives may be issued as warranted.

The previous published guidelines still remain in effect:

1. **Distribution of Communion under the species of bread alone.** We receive the totality of Christ when we receive the sacred host. The distribution of communion from the

chalice could be a high risk for contamination, and thus it has been discontinued except for priests and deacons.

2. **The invitation to receive communion on the hand.** This measure is to protect ministers and recipients; reception on the tongue could inadvertently contaminate the hands of those distributing communion.
3. **Eliminating the exchange of the physical sign of peace and omitting the spontaneous gesture of hand-holding during the Our Father** in an effort to minimize physical contact.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that we should not experience any pangs of conscience as we adjust to these changes over the next few weeks. I am well aware that this is a hard time in the lives of our Catholic faithful and for our many brothers and sisters who, though not of our faith, like us observe the Holy Season of Lent. Perhaps we can embrace the sacrifices we are now experiencing and join them to our other Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. We pray we will be able to celebrate an Easter season free of the threat that is not only disrupting our worship routines but causing great suffering in so many peoples' lives.

In Christ our Hope,



Most Reverend Michael Gerard Duca
Bishop of Baton Rouge

*At the Chancery
March 13, 2020*