



CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF FORT WORTH
THE BISHOP'S OFFICE



Pastoral Letter

To All Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious Men and Women,
and Lay Faithful of the Diocese of Fort Worth

March 12, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Eucharist is a sacrament of Charity above all else. We are bound together in the love of God and our neighbor whenever we celebrate and receive the Eucharist as God's People. The recent declaration by the World Health Organization (WHO - <https://www.who.int/>) that the transmission of the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) is now a pandemic can prompt fear and panic among us and tempt us to sin against charity. It is incumbent upon us as faithful members of the Church to act with the utmost of solidarity, justice, and prudence in rejecting selfish fear and embracing our responsibility to love our neighbor, especially the vulnerable, for the sake of peace and the common good of our society. Mass will continue to be offered on Sundays in the Diocese of Fort Worth despite the cancellation of many public events throughout the larger community. Prevention is key, washing hands frequently, cover your cough and sneezes, drinking plenty of water, and to stay home when ill or prone to infection.

We are consulting the Texas Department of State Health Services and the local county public health departments to keep us current with up-to-date information <https://dshs.texas.gov/coronavirus/> and <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/index.html>.

We will follow all directives issued by civil and health officials.

On January 10, 2020 the Diocese of Fort Worth instituted liturgical adaptations to protect the vulnerable and to mitigate the spread of contagion. These adaptations remain in force, including:

- No holding hands during the Our Father and encouraging folded hands in reverence.

- Sign of the Peace: a slight bow or a smile in lieu of a handshake or omitted entirely in accord with the rubrics of the Mass.
- The faithful are strongly encouraged to receive the host in the ancient form of on the hand out of charity for their neighbor.
- Holy Communion is to be distributed only under one species. The distribution of Holy Communion by the chalice is not to be administered.
- If a non-communicant comes forward for a blessing from the priest, the blessing should be given without touching them.
- The faithful are reminded that in receiving the Eucharist under one species, they are still receiving Jesus Christ—Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—as the Church has always taught and as Christ intended.

Practical protocols:

- Pray for good health and the protection of each of us from the spread of this virus.
- In prudence, I am asking pastors to keep Holy Water fonts empty to reduce the threat of contagion and to promote solidarity and peace of mind in place of fear.
- Priests will use smaller celebrant's host and communicate themselves and assisting deacons from the chalice.
- Priests are reminded to wash their hands before celebrating Mass and after Mass; they should apply hand sanitizer before distributing Holy Communion to others.
- Extraordinary and ordinary ministers of the Eucharist who do not exhibit symptoms should apply hand sanitizer and distribute Holy Communion to the faithful. If extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion exhibit symptoms, they should stay home.
- All ordinary and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should apply hand sanitizer after distribution of Holy Communion and wash their hands after Mass.
- The number of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should be in proportion to the number of the faithful attending Mass; an excessively large number of extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion increases the possibility of transmission of the virus.
- Pastors are reminded to maintain sufficient consecrated hosts in the tabernacle should the emergency celebration of Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest (SCAP) be required in the event of a priest's illness and the unavailability of a substitute priest. Deacons should be prepared to preside at SCAP in such cases, which are to be reported to the Office of the Bishop.
- Meetings and events at parishes will continue unless the pastor cancels them.

Once again, I encourage each of the faithful to remain at home if one exhibits signs of any contagious illness. The guideline recommended by health officials is for those with the virus to remain home for 14 days, which translates to two weekends. The elderly with chronic health conditions should also remain home to prevent transmission of the virus. We are asking our parishes' homebound ministry to offer Communion to shut-ins with the oversight of their pastors. The law of charity supersedes all other obligations. People who are sick, who exhibit contagious symptoms, or who are particularly vulnerable to the transmission of the virus are dispensed in charity from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. To stay home from Sunday Mass in these circumstances is not a mortal sin. In fact,

love for our neighbor should prompt each of us not to attend Mass if we are contagious and exhibiting symptoms.

We will notify pastors if any additional measures are taken. We will post that information as well as links to civil and health organizations that are providing up-to-date information about the coronavirus. The Diocese's website is www.fwdioc.org.

There is an essential and required responsibility for all priests, deacons, and extraordinary ministers to use reasonable precautions to protect the faithful who attend Mass and receive the Eucharist. It is also incumbent upon us not to incite fear and panic among the members of our community. This responsibility is especially true for priests and deacons, that our preaching be sober and not alarmist. Pope Francis recently reminded the clergy of Rome of their necessary and pastoral responsibility not to avoid sacramental and pastoral care for the sick in times of epidemic out of fear and panic. I do the same and encourage each and all of us to reject panic and embrace faith to make our contribution to the common good with solidarity and love for our neighbor. I remain,

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael F. Olson".

Most Reverend Michael F. Olson, STD, MA
Bishop of Fort Worth