

December 13, 2020

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We pray that this letter finds you well amidst a blessed and edifying Nativity Fast!

As physicians serving individuals from multiple counties within the Diocese of Oakland, Charleston, and the Mid-Atlantic, each of us has witnessed rapidly rising numbers of patients hospitalized as a result of COVID-19 infection. The past weeks have indeed pushed hospitals in many parts of the Diocese to near capacity. Similar circumstances are being seen in surrounding areas and indeed around the country. Sadly, many predict that this trend will continue for another three months. As providers, the unpredictable behavior of the virus as well as the rapidity with which the afflicted can decline raises great concern. It is thus our intention to provide any guidance that may offer some level of protection to the beloved clergy and parishioners of our Diocese.

As you are likely aware, Pennsylvania has enacted new restrictions taking effect yesterday, December 12, and continuing through at least January 4. In that all parishes of the Archdiocese must adhere to local authorities in this matter, questions may arise as to how parish life in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and throughout the Diocese will be impacted. In this regard, we provide the following guidance and suggestions:

- While exemptions to limitations on the size of gatherings within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania exist for religious gatherings, these exemptions apply to religious services only. Per His Grace Bishop THOMAS, all worship services that are blessed and permitted by the Archdiocese are covered under this exemption.
- The religious service exemptions of Pennsylvania do not negate previous directives of the Archdiocese. In this regard, parishes of the Diocese are permitted to remain open at current capacity for Divine Services based on guidelines set forth by the Archdiocese and Diocese and in consultation with local authorities. Mitigation efforts of social distancing of at least six feet for individuals not from the same household and proper cleaning remain mandatory. Similarly, if you feel ill, you should stay home and consult with your physician.
- Per Bishop THOMAS, all other activities held within church facilities apart from worship services are to be postponed or held virtually until further notice unless exception has been granted by the Archdiocese or Diocesan Office. The only other exception are ministries directly related to the service of the needy. Within Pennsylvania, the operation of ministries to the needy must adhere to indoor gathering restrictions of 10% of room capacity *and* no more than 10 persons at a given time. In all parishes of the Diocese, these ministries must adhere to capacity guidelines set forth by local authorities and the Archdiocese.
- Exemptions for religious gatherings set forth in Pennsylvania do not negate mandatory face covering orders set forth by the Commonwealth when attending such services. All states within the Diocese have face covering/masking orders which should be strictly adhered to. It is our opinion that all attendees of religious services throughout the

Diocese should wear a mask unless under two years of age or a medical condition dictates otherwise. The Archdiocese also very strongly encourages the same.

- If the pastor of any parish deems himself, the demographic or location of his parish at particularly high risk, he should consult with Dr. James Rossetti immediately. Changes in the present policy will then be considered and appropriate action may be taken by His Grace and the local pastor after receiving advice from Dr. Rossetti.
- As local guidelines are changing rapidly, we urge both clergy and parishioners to monitor their local guidelines with regularity.
- Importantly, regarding distribution and reception of Holy Communion, we are familiar with the practices of our clergy and desire to reassure all of you that, if you are otherwise prepared, there is nothing to fear in approaching the medicine of immortality, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Keep in mind that the Eucharist is received to the healing of both body and soul.
- If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to Dr. James Rossetti at 412-266-3089 or [jamesmrossetti@gmail.com](mailto:jamesmrossetti@gmail.com).

Brothers and sisters, as we journey through the Nativity season together, we pray that you and your loved ones take this pandemic seriously and make all effort to protect yourselves and others. As difficult of a time as this is, the Incarnation brings us the ultimate gift, God Himself. As we approach the Nativity of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, we are reminded that this is undeniably a season of hope. By making room for Christ and His children in our inn, may we experience the words of the angel, “Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people.”

You are in our prayers.

In Christ,

Dr. Christina S. Armanious

Dr. Jeffrey P. Carpenter

Dr. James M. Rossetti