



20 March 2020

COVID-19 UPDATE FROM BISHOP FABBRO

With our situation changing on a daily – and sometimes hourly – basis, I convened the Episcopal Council in a conference call to get a sense of how they, our pastoral teams, our employees, and our parishioners are faring in this difficult time. They raised a number of questions of their own and by others seeking clarification. Our discussion led to this new update. The following directives come into effect immediately:

1. Warnings from Health Officials

It has been stated again and again by Health Officials across the world, and emphasized by those countries that have been most affected, including China and Italy, that the only way to prevent the spread of the disease is to stop groups of people from gathering. Dr. Theresa Tam, the Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, at her press conference on March 19 said, “Our collective resolve to overcome COVID-19 must be solid and unbendable. We don’t just need to flatten the curve, we need to plank it.” These words inspire in us all a “solid and unbendable” resolve.

2. Recordings of Masses (live-streaming or uploaded)

While we have had a long tradition of televised Masses, we want to ensure that all such Masses are celebrated respectfully and according to liturgical norms. Only those parishes which have had a practice of live-streaming or otherwise broadcasting Masses from their churches before the current outbreak in our region, that is before March 1, 2020, may continue to broadcast such Masses, provided they have the permission of the Bishop.

3. All Churches are Closed to the Public

There is no exception to this directive for any reason (see Update of March 17, #1a).

4. Services in Funeral Homes

We are aware of the sadness and extra hardship families have to deal with in light of the cancellation of Funeral Masses. Yet, we must be vigilant to avoid any gatherings. Therefore, there are to be no services in funeral homes. No priest, deacon, lay ecclesial minister, or chaplain in the Diocese shall accept a request or an invitation from family members or funeral directors to lead such services beyond a committal service at the cemetery with immediate family members present. This directive is being communicated to all funeral homes in the Diocese (March 17, #1c).

5. Weddings

The permission for weddings given in the last update is now rescinded (March 17, #1d). If there is an extraordinary reason for having a wedding (e.g., legal, immigration, health), it shall be celebrated in the parish office with only the priest or deacon and two witnesses with the bride and groom. Permission for such cases shall be obtained from the Chancellor.

6. Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord and the Sacred Paschal Triduum

It is recommended that pastors bless palm branches and make them available outside of churches for parishioners to pick up.

In line with a decree of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, issued March 19, 2020, the Triduum will be celebrated in all parish churches of the Diocese as follows:

- a) Priests will privately celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper, without the ritual of the Washing of the Feet, or the procession of the Holy Eucharist which normally ends the celebration of that Mass. The Blessed Sacrament will be reserved in the ordinary tabernacle, without the usual Chapel for Reservation used on Holy Thursday. The faculty to celebrate this Mass without the people is granted in an exceptional manner by the Holy See to all priests.
- b) There will be no service on Friday of the Passion of the Lord. Instead, priests are encouraged to read the Passion of the Lord and pray the Universal Prayer from the liturgy of the day, and include prayers for all whose lives are being affected by the pandemic.
- c) There will be no Easter Vigil. The sacraments of Christian Initiation and the reception of candidates for Full Communion are to be postponed until a later date.
- d) The Mass of Easter Sunday will be celebrated privately by priests on Easter morning. They are to light the Pascal Candle and bless water using the formula in the Roman Missal on p. 358.
- e) Pastoral team members are encouraged to announce the times that these Masses will take place, so that the faithful may be spiritually united in prayer. Resources for the celebrations may be shared with parishioners, such as the readings for each day of the Triduum. It would be an admirable thing for priests and deacons to prepare appropriate homilies for these celebrations which could be shared with parishioners through electronic means, including websites and Facebook.
- f) Pastors of French and National parishes are encouraged to find resources in their languages and to consider preparing homilies as mentioned above.

7. Confessions

Many are distressed by the fact that all Confessions, except in cases of danger of death, are cancelled (March 17, #2a). This directive does not change, since churches are closed and any announced times of confessions would bring crowds together. As well, health officials have advised us that people can carry the virus and spread it even without showing symptoms. We must be vigilant in all ways. "Drive-thru" confessionals are simply not acceptable.

We must be mindful that God is a merciful God. Pope Francis addressed this topic today, March 20, when he said that people who cannot go to confession because of the coronavirus lock down can go directly to God, be specific about their sins, request pardon, and experience God's loving forgiveness. "This is the right time, the opportune moment. An act of contrition done well, and our souls will become white like the snow."

Pope Francis quoted the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* when speaking this morning. God welcomes every sinner with open arms, he said. Make an act of contrition, and promise God "I will go to confession afterward, but forgive me now." And immediately you will return to the state of grace with God."

Pope Francis granted a Plenary Indulgence for this troubling time. A Plenary Indulgence is granted by the Holy Father at special times such as Holy Years or for specific pilgrimages. To gain a Plenary Indulgence one must fulfill the prescribed conditions of: a complete and whole-hearted detachment from all sin of any kind, even venial sin; praying the Creed or the Our Father and for the intentions of the Pope. One is also expected to go to Mass and to Confession. In this case, Pope Francis specified that Mass and Confession should be sought as soon as they are available when this crisis subsides.

Pope Francis gave Diocesan Bishops permission to offer General Absolution to their parishioners when justified by the circumstances. It was determined that the current situation in the Diocese of London did not meet the conditions for General Absolution at this time, especially in light of the gift of the Plenary Indulgence.

8. Meeting of 12-Step Groups

The permission for meetings of 12-Step groups given in the last update is now rescinded (March 17, #4d). The National AA organization has cancelled all AA meetings. While such meetings are very helpful for those suffering from an addiction, we encourage members to find other means of support offered through their respective organization, such as online, by telephone or by talking to their sponsor.

9. Newly Activated Families of Parishes and Pastoral Appointments

In light of the cancellation of parish meetings and the difficulty for new Families of Parishes to get organized, the inauguration date for new Families will be pushed back, to a date to be determined in consultation with them. Pastoral moves which normally take place in July will also likely be pushed back.

10. Reaching our Parishioners

We emphasize the need for pastoral teams to reach out to parishioners in whatever way possible to address their spiritual needs. We strongly encourage members of pastoral teams to call as many as possible those who are on your parish roster. In light of self-isolation and other forms of quarantine, a personal call may be the only contact many of them would have with the outside world. It is essential that these calls be made by the pastoral team and staff only, due to the confidentiality of parishioner contact information and for fear by some of scam telephone calls.

11. Resources for Prayer for the Domestic Church

We reiterate the importance of our homes as “houses of prayer”, and encourage pastoral teams to bring to the attention of their parishioners the resources that are uploaded on the Diocese’s website. In addition, pastoral teams will have their own resources to offer their parishioners.

Included in resources available to pastoral teams, we have sent via Parish Briefings a statement that may be used for letters, email or telephone inquiries.

The Episcopal Council will meet with me on a weekly conference call, so that we may continue to respond to parishioners’ needs as required. Be assured of our prayers and solidarity with you.



Most Reverend Ronald P. Fabbro, C.S.B.
Bishop of London