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Advent and Christmas and the months ahead: the pandemic, and our response in faith

The expected COVID-19 *Thanksgiving weekend surge* is being felt in Memphis and Jackson and in many of the 21 counties of west Tennessee that comprise our Diocese of Memphis. Some of our hospitals are nearing their limit on ICU and quarantine beds for infected patients. And, a *Christmas surge* of this novel coronavirus will, in all likelihood, be seen and felt by front – line medical staff and by our families in the New Year. It appears that the great majority of our people will be able to take the vaccine shot....in the spring or early summer. Granting this time-line, it appears that this death-dealing pandemic will be with us for many months to come.

Though all of us are fatigued by the many stresses experienced since March, we must continue to walk by faith. We must continue the ongoing mission of Christ's Church, even with this fatigue, even in these difficult days. As missionary disciples of the Risen Lord, we are to proclaim His Way of Life, in and through the way we live out His Golden Rule (Lv. 19.18; Luke 10. 25-37; Luke 6. 31; Matthew 7. 12; 25. 31-46). This is why ***all of us*** should wear our masks when in public (around anyone) and keep our physical distance between one another and wash and sanitize our hands frequently!

Recognizing the spiking of infection in many of our counties and the understandable fear that many of our people have of this new virus, please know the following:

FIRST, as of today, by this DECREE, I offer a **DISPENSATION** from the obligation to attend the celebration of holy Mass on Sundays and on Holy Days of obligation, to all the faithful in the 21 counties that make up the Catholic Diocese of Memphis. This DISPENSATION from the "Sunday obligation" will remain in effect until I judge it safe to call all to join me again for public worship.

Our Pastors will continue their spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Our priests will continue to offer holy Mass and stream the celebration of holy Mass. **We are not closing our parishes;** but we are to follow the guidelines that follow, for the health of all, for the common good of all.

Yes, "on Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate at Mass (canon 1247 of the Church's Canon Law)". This "obligation" is both a joy and a discipline for us Catholics, to gather together as members of the Body of Christ, proclaiming the Presence of the Lord and accepting our commission, as proclaimers of His Victory over sin and death. And, with God's help, we will again "fill up the pews" in praise and thanksgiving, once this pandemic is controlled through the sciences and through our compassionate following of safeguards. We need to support the faith of one another during these difficult days.

SECOND: please follow the required instructions and restrictions listed below:

1. The withholding of the *cup of blessing* (chalices for Holy Communion) and the withholding of any physical exchange of peace during Mass continues in effect until further notice.
2. Aside from the different fora of the public celebration of holy Mass, there are to be no gatherings in the parish of more than fifty people in any one classroom or enclosed space, properly distanced, other than the Nave, until further notice. This should not prevent PRE and Catechumenate programs from starting, and we need for these programs of ongoing formation to begin their work. Pastors are to discern which activities of the parish community will continue to take place during this pandemic.
3. In our parishes and missions, social gatherings *after* the celebration of baptisms, weddings, funerals, and *quinceañeras* should not take place. Each Pastor will offer guidance to the people of the parish.
4. Choirs may begin to assist our worship during holy Mass, with proper distancing and the use of masks.
5. Each Pastor and Administrator, being particularly attentive to the health bulletins issued from state, city, and county officials, is to discern and decide the capacity that the Nave of their worship space should hold, up to a 50% of capacity (with distancing). This may mean that Pastors of large parishes may need to offer additional Masses or additional areas for Mass or both. This is to remain in effect until further notice.
6. All C.D.C. guidelines for personal hygiene are to be followed (hand washing and sanitizing). Facial coverings (masks) must be worn while at the parish or mission, until further notice.
7. The Pastor is to urge all of his parishioners to know that, out of love for their clergy and their neighbor, it is preferable to receive the Eucharist in their hands, until further notice. We urge this, but gently and with sensitivity. The communicant should take off his or her mask just before approaching the cleric or Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion, putting it back on after reception of Holy Communion.
8. All clergy and all that assist them in administering Holy Communion should take every precaution: purifying hands thoroughly before and after offering Holy Communion; wearing a face mask during the Rite of Communion. During holy Mass, the cleric is to wear the mask in the Procession, during the Liturgy of the Word, until the Proclamation of the Gospel begins and during the recessional.

THIRD: Since the beginning of the “COVID 19” crisis, the Principals and their assistants of the Catholic schools in the Diocese, in collaboration with their Pastors, have worked “non-stop” to prepare for the opening of our schools. Since the start of this school year, our Principals, teachers and staff have achieved outstanding results within this pandemic environment. They have continued the great work of offering Christ centered Catholic formation for our children and teens. I am so grateful for their dedicated service *and* their leadership. Regarding sports activities at our Catholic schools, our Diocesan website has a listing of which sports activities are available to our children and teens. School web-sites have this information available as well.

As we continue to deal with the various points of crisis in our cities and towns (health, hunger, loss of jobs, situational depression, fear and concern, drug and alcohol abuse, the issues of race relations), please be assured that I will offer additional instructions as they are needed. I ask all Pastors to inform your parishioners of the contents of this Decree.

Additional Guidelines for Parishes

1. How is the parish to open up the nursery? Pastors are to work with their volunteer teams to decide if a nursery should be opened, remembering physical distancing and the need for facial coverings. Each Pastor should check with his local health department about their advice regarding the Nursery and the Parents Day Out. Consider encouraging people with small children to keep them at home to the extent practicable. This is why I ask every pastor with a capacity to “stream” parish liturgies to do so, so that all staying at home will be able to join the parish community in prayer.

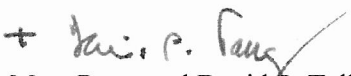
2. Outdoor Mass and additional Masses. This seems like the ideal option to choose if it is possible for the parish. Some parishes have large fields that could accommodate quite a large outdoor mass with people physically distanced (and bringing their own lawn chairs). This could be beneficial for parishes with very large numbers of parishioners. And, at larger churches, consider an overflow mass into a gym or family room, either celebrated by another priest or on video with a deacon or EMOHC to bring communion to the faithful in the overflow room at time for communion.

3. The “collection basket” is not to be passed person to person. Either have a common bowl that people drop their offering in, or have the ushers with the baskets on poles collect the offering. Also, consider for the time being to try and limit common touching of items. Perhaps temporarily remove missals and hymnals, so multiple people won’t be handling books or missals. Maybe paper song sheets with the lyrics printed on them could be used instead.

4. Cleaning. Pastors are to make sure that the restrooms have plenty of soap, paper towels, and there is hand sanitizer. Pews and all the high contact areas should be sanitized between masses. This would likely include door handles, pews, and rails. If cleaning products are made readily available, they could consider asking select parishioner volunteers to help with this wipe down between masses. And, recommend having a cleaning crew conduct a more thorough cleaning during the week.

5. Ushers-greeters should continue to offer sanitizer fluids to our people before every holy Mass.

This Decree is given on the 11th of December 2020 and takes effect today. I am yours, in the light and love of the Risen Lord,


Most Reverend David P. Talley



Very Reverend James Clark, J.V., Chancellor