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DIOCESE OF MEMPHIS  
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To: Pastors of our Parochial Schools and the Principals of the Catholic Schools of the Diocese of Memphis:

On Tuesday, August 17, a day after we received word of Governor Lee’s new Executive Order regarding “masking”, I called for a Zoom meeting, inviting the Pastors of our Parochial Catholic Schools and the Principals of all of the Catholic Schools in West Tennessee (diocesan, parochial and private), to join me in a discernment about the health of our children and teens who are being formed in discipleship and education in our schools. Joining us on this Zoom meeting: Father Keith Stewart, Vicar General of the Diocese; Nic Antoine, Superintendent of Catholic Schools; Sandra Goldstein, R.N., Director of Human Resources; Robert Hutton, J.D., Diocesan Attorney; Rick Ouellette, Director of Communications.

We heard from our Diocesan counsel, that the much-discussed new Executive Order *did not affect* our Catholic Schools in requiring the “opt out of masking” provision. After hearing this, I then listened to the gathered assembly of professionals, as they discussed the issues surrounding the reality of this infectious, novel coronavirus with its variants and how our children and teens are being cared for by our schools. Many discussed the stresses experienced by our families. The Principals shared the stresses experienced by our teachers and staff during this incredible “COVID cloud”. Our Pastors, Principals, teachers and support staff have been facing the reality of this pandemic *since March of 2020*. They are tired...but resolute - in offering the best for our families. I call them today’s Catholic heroes.

Our discussion centered on the reality of COVID-19, its variants, and the new rise in infection rate in Shelby County. Many of the Principals mentioned that after a week of school opening, they have had to isolate students after coming into contact with positive COVID-19 cases.

After all shared concerns and suggestions, along with their love for our families, children and teens, and after all affirmed our desire - to follow the Golden Rule of the Lord Jesus in caring for our neighbor, the strong consensus was to continue to mandate the wearing of masks in our Catholic schools in Shelby County, *until the situation allows us to loosen these health precautions*.

The professional team that assists me in the Chancery will continue to monitor the health data regarding COVID-19 and will stay in close touch with our schools. Our Superintendent and our Chancery staff will revisit this decision every two/three weeks. The next update should be on or about September 3. Please communicate this decision to the families that entrust their children and teens to our care. This announcement will be placed on our Website on August the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Bishop David P. Talley