



March 17, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

It saddens me to share this with you, but I have decided to suspend all public Masses in the Diocese of Erie effective Wednesday, March 18 until further notice.

This is not a decision I wanted to make; nor did I make it lightly. But given the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is an important decision made for the good of the community, especially the most vulnerable among us.

We are working to make a number of resources available for the faithful, some of which I will share with you in this letter. But first, in the midst of this challenging moment, I want to provide you with spiritual encouragement and strength.

It is understandable that people are feeling overwhelmed — there's so much uncertainty in our lives in the face of this pandemic, something we have never experienced. In recent days, our lives have changed considerably. Families are scrambling to figure out how they are going to address the needs of children who are suddenly no longer leaving the house to go to school. Many of us are not allowed to visit elderly relatives who are in nursing homes. It's difficult not to wonder what additional limitations may be imposed at any given moment.

We are all human, and our concerns are natural. We can't help but worry about how we will navigate these changes in our lives. In addition to those whose health is at risk, I am particularly concerned for those whose livelihoods will be compromised for what could be a significant period of time.

There is no better time to grow in our faith than in a moment of trial. While the stress is real, our faith teaches us to trust in the Lord. "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him," Jesus said, just before he gave us the Lord's Prayer.

Even though public Masses have been suspended, I want to assure you every priest in the diocese will continue to offer a private Mass each day. I have asked that they remember the intentions of their parishioners at each Mass; that will be my intention as well.



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In addition, we each still have an obligation to “keep holy the Sabbath.” Please give serious consideration as to how you will accomplish this, particularly throughout Holy Week and Easter. I am asking families to worship together in their homes each Sunday. Our website will have a link to the readings for Sunday Mass, and we expect to livestream a Mass from St. Peter Cathedral in Erie, the mother church of the diocese, each Sunday morning. Please reference www.ErieRCD.org for final details, including the time. I have every confidence the Lord will bless us as we find new and creative ways to welcome him into our lives.

I have asked pastors to keep their churches open for visitation as much as possible. Many parishes will offer Exposition so people will be able to pray before the Blessed Sacrament, even if it must be done while remaining an acceptable distance away from others. We also will soon publish information about how baptisms, reconciliation, confirmation, weddings, anointings and funerals will be handled in the coming weeks and months.

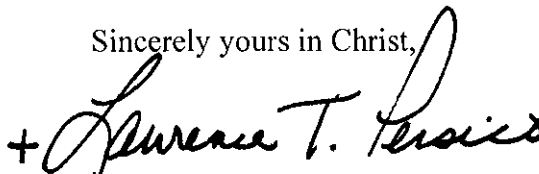
There are many Scripture verses that can help us, and we have begun to provide spiritual resources for you at www.ErieRCD.org/inspiration.html. Be intentional about setting aside time to read and pray so you will remain centered. Remember to pray for others at this moment: for our leaders, for researchers, for healthcare workers, for the sick, for our communities, for those who will suffer financial hardship, and for those who have died, as well as their families, among others. As a Christian community, we must intercede on behalf of each other.

We’ve included a link to Pope Francis’ prayer to Our Lady, Salvation of the People of Rome, among the resources we’ve posted. And although our site also includes a Spiritual Communion prayer, given that we will have no public Masses until further notice, I want to share it with you here. I recommend you pray it every day:

“My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love you above all things, and I desire to receive you into my soul. Since I cannot receive you at this moment sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace you as if you were already there and unite myself wholly to you. Never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.”

Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, pray for us.
St. Patrick, patron of the Diocese of Erie, pray for us.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lawrence T. Persico". To the left of the signature is a small cross symbol.

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie

In addition to his announcement that no public Masses would be celebrated effective March 18, Bishop Persico instituted several norms to guide priests during this time. Among them:

1. All priests are to continue to celebrate Mass daily, for the spiritual benefit of those entrusted to their care. If they are not assisted by a deacon, they should celebrate, even if alone.
 - *Pastors in particular are reminded of their sacred responsibility to personally celebrate Mass for their parishioners (pro populo) every Sunday. Other than these, Masses can continue to be celebrated for the intentions already in place.*
 - *For the celebration of the Easter Triduum, where the priest will not be assisted by a deacon, he should find another priest with whom to concelebrate the Triduum liturgies – each for the benefit of his own parishioners – so that no priest need celebrate alone. Episcopal vicars and deans should stand ready to help coordinate this for any priest who asks for their assistance.*
2. All parish and secondary churches in which the Eucharist is reserved are to remain open daily for the faithful to visit the Blessed Sacrament.
 - *Periods of Eucharistic exposition and adoration are encouraged.*
 - *These should be extended over several hours at a time, in order to allow the faithful to stagger their visits so that the church never becomes crowded and people may come and go without unnecessary contact.*
 - *Instruct parishioners to maintain social distance between themselves and others.*
 - *This is a time to catechize parishioners on how to make a spiritual communion. Resources to help you will be forthcoming from the diocese.*
3. Priests may continue to hear individual confessions in the church – none in the rectory – either by appointment or at scheduled times.
 - *Instruct parishioners during scheduled times to maintain social distance between themselves and others.*
4. Anointing of the sick should continue as usual, based upon need.
 - *Non-emergency visits such as First Friday calls should be suspended.*

The following are effective immediately through May 17, 2020:

5. All confirmations through May 17, 2020 will be rescheduled, once the situation stabilizes.
6. Funeral Masses may continue to be celebrated, but with only the immediate family members and funeral home workers present.
7. Baptisms may continue to be celebrated, but only with the sponsor(s) and immediate family members present. New water must be blessed for every individual baptism.
8. Marriages may continue to be celebrated, but only with the bride, groom, two witnesses, and immediate family members present.

Some other general notes:

- The bishops of Pennsylvania are in regular contact, in order to provide you with the best pastoral help and direction possible.
- Please encourage your parishioners to find some way to keep holy the sabbath. Resources will be available on the diocesan website. Sunday Masses will be live-streamed from the cathedral each week.
- Do your best to help parishioners understand the bigger picture. This is, in fact, a pro-life approach to this challenging moment. It is essential that we take steps to protect the most vulnerable among us.

These times call for us to look beyond ourselves to the benefit of those whom we serve. I have every confidence that we will get through this together, with God's grace. Cooperating with all that the advice given by the CDC and other groups, we nonetheless remember that prayer is our first resource in the fight against COVID-19. Be assured of my continued prayers and support for you.