

20May

May 20, 2020 – Minnesota Catholic bishops' letter regarding resumption of public Masses

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Catholic Bishops of Minnesota, along with many people of faith, were disappointed in Governor Walz's May 13 announcement that he would end the Stay-at-Home order to allow more commerce but prohibit religious gatherings of more than ten people. We have attempted to work collaboratively with the Walz Administration up to this time, seeking the guidance of the Department of Public Safety and the Department of Public Health to help us strengthen our specific safety protocols based on the statewide plan. Along with some Lutheran colleagues, we submitted a plan to the Governor on May 8 that detailed the sanitation measures we would take and proposed a cap on occupancy limited to 33 percent of building capacity. Our proposed protocols are based on the work undertaken by a group of national medical experts and theologians, the Thomistic Institute, and they are consistent with the practices that have already been put in place in many dioceses throughout the United States. We continue our willingness to make any necessary adjustments to our safety protocols upon review.

The Life of Faith is Essential

Given our willingness to coordinate with the Governor, we are especially disappointed that his most recent order (20-56) does not address both the vital importance that faith plays in the lives of Americans, especially in this time of pandemic, and the fundamental religious freedom possessed by houses of worship that allows our country to thrive. The Governor's remarks today further underscored a failure to appreciate the role of our Church and other faith groups in serving the community. The human cost to this pandemic has been extraordinary, not just in terms of lives lost to the virus but the rapidly growing problems of job loss, depression, crime and violence, and substance abuse. As Pope Francis has said, the church must be a field hospital, ministering to all, but especially the poor and vulnerable. He has cautioned that overly drastic measures that limit church life will have a disproportionate impact on "the little ones" and those who have no one to rely on.

The bishops of Minnesota are united in our conviction that we can safely resume public Masses in accordance with both our religious duties and with accepted public health and safety standards. We can worship in a way that reflects both the love of God and the love of our neighbors (cf. Mark 12:30-31). Therefore, we are giving our parishes permission for the resumption of the public celebration of Mass on Tuesday, May 26, which will give us time to be ready for the celebration of Pentecost on May 31. Parishes will be required to follow the strict protocols we have published for sanitation and social distancing and will have to limit attendance

to one-third of the seating capacity of the church. No one will be obliged to attend, as the bishops of Minnesota will continue to dispense from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass.

Responsible Worship in Service of the Common Good

We share the Governor's concern about the importance of taking all reasonable precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We have charged our parishes with the task of preparing for a limited return to public Mass, but we are not requiring them to begin public Mass on May 26. Each parish community needs to be comfortable that it can meet the standards set forth in extensive and stringent diocesan protocols. We already know that many will be unable to do that immediately because of the configuration of their churches or because of a shortage of staff or supplies. They need a plan for how they would limit admittance to one-third of the seating capacity of their church, and how they will seat those who arrive. We also recognize that some parishes may choose, for now, to adhere to the existing ten-person limit. We trust local leadership will determine when they are able to follow all the directives and open, and we stand ready to assist them when necessary.

We also know that parishes may have to adjust to changing circumstances, recognizing that we do not know how the pandemic will affect us in the weeks and months ahead. A parish that begins public Mass on Pentecost, for example, may have to impose further restrictions later in the year, in the event of an outbreak in the local community.

We have made it clear that the obligation of a Catholic to attend Sunday Mass remains suspended and we have uniformly encouraged those most at risk to stay home. Not surprisingly, dioceses in other states that have already reopened their churches for public Masses report that the number of those attending is significantly reduced. We ask our parishes to continue to provide ministry by live streaming even when public Masses resume. We find it reasonable, moreover, that parishes would continue to look for opportunities for outdoor celebrations.

Rights and Responsibilities

In moving forward with public worship in this limited manner, we wish to provide more explanation for our decision. First, the six dioceses of Minnesota voluntarily suspended parish activities, Catholic schools, and the public celebration of Mass, and did so before any executive orders were put in place. We have followed public health guidance and Governor Walz's leadership so that we, as a state, could 1) flatten the curve, 2) allow time for the necessary health care infrastructure to be created to handle a surge of patients and avoid unnecessary deaths, and 3) allow a testing regime to be put in place to limit spread of COVID-19. We have done so because we care for our neighbors and it is important for us to be in solidarity with our vulnerable sisters and brothers. We have also done so out of respect for rightful authority—another biblical principle (cf. Romans 13).

Second, we have attempted to engage in dialogue with the Administration. We have twice sent the Governor letters asking for a dialogue, most recently last Saturday. Though public health and public safety officials have listened to our concerns and have created opportunities for input and

conversation, we have not received a concrete timeline and roadmap for resuming public worship that includes reasonable guidance on congregational size.

Third, we believe we have been leading by example. Our people and institutions have enthusiastically cooperated with the public health guidance and have been part of the solution at every turn: providing relief to struggling families, finding creative ways to minister to a suffering people, serving on the front lines of the health care crisis, and leaping forward in technology to meet the demand for spiritual comfort created by this pandemic.

Our decision to suspend the public celebration of Mass was painful. We made that decision not because we were compelled to do so, but because we judged that the circumstances required it. We believe that those circumstances have changed, as confirmed by the Governor's decision to end the Stay-at-Home order and allow more commerce. It is now permissible for an unspecified number of people to go to shopping malls and enter stores, so long as no more than 50 percent of the occupancy capacity is reached. Big-box stores have hundreds of people inside at any one time, and the number of goods that are being handled and distributed in one store by many people—stock staff, customers, cashiers—is astounding. Workers are present for many hours per day, often in close proximity. There is no state mandate that customers wear masks in those malls or stores, wash their hands consistently, or follow any specific cleaning protocol. In these circumstances, and given the well-researched protocols that we have proposed (and that are being followed successfully elsewhere in our nation) how can reason require us any longer to keep our faithful from the Eucharist?

We are blessed to live in a nation that guarantees the free exercise of religion. This right can only be abridged for a compelling governmental interest, and only in a way that is narrowly tailored to be the least restrictive means of achieving the desired end. That is why a large majority of states now allow in-person religious services, including many states that had previously suspended in-person religious services. We think that the executive order issued last Wednesday fails this test. An order that sweeps so broadly that it prohibits, for example, a gathering of 11 people in a Cathedral with a seating capacity of several thousand defies reason. Therefore, we have chosen to move forward in the absence of any specific timeline laid out by Governor Walz and his Administration. We cannot allow an indefinite suspension of the public celebration of the Mass.

In conclusion, as local leadership makes these important decisions about when to safely re-open, we ask them to be in communication with diocesan leadership about their plans. The bishops of Minnesota are grateful that we have such excellent leadership in our parishes and we know that as we work together, we can provide for the essential sacramental life of our faithful, fulfill our duty to worship God, and do so in a way that also protects the common good of our state (cf. Matthew 6:25-34).

We remain yours in Christ Jesus the Lord,

Most Rev. Bernard A. Hebda
Archbishop of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis

Most Rev. Michael J. Hoepfner
Bishop of the Diocese of Crookston

Most Rev. Donald J. Kettler
Bishop of the Diocese of St. Cloud

Most Rev. John M. LeVoir
Bishop of the Diocese of New Ulm

Most Rev. John M. Quinn
Bishop of the Diocese of Winona-Rochester

Most Rev. Andrew H. Cozzens
Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis

Very Rev. James Bissonette
Diocesan Administrator of the Diocese of Duluth