



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

1311 BYRON STREET
POST OFFICE BOX 230
WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA 26003

April 24, 2020

Dear Brothers,

Three weeks ago I wrote you as we were about to begin Holy Week. Now we are in the Easter season but our penitential regimen continues with the physical separation we are practicing to assist in stemming the spread of the Coronavirus.

I are very grateful for your cooperation with the measures the Diocese has adopted out of concern for the good of our people. I know it is hard for you. We priests are used to being with our people. It is unnatural to have to bar them from our churches and not allow public Masses or other normal gatherings in our parishes. Yet by doing so we are caring for our people, just as the Church did in previous epidemics and plagues when it locked the church doors.

You probably have heard of some attempts around the country to open up churches and conduct religious services. There is some pressure from well-known Catholic figures to do the same. You may also have had parishioners urging you to “just let me into the church to pray” or “please let us come back to Mass.”

I must be clear that I want the closure of our churches and suspension of Masses with a congregation to continue until I give the green light to open the church doors again and receive our people. The current discipline is for their good. It is also for yours; as your bishop, I have to think of your welfare as well. In a conversation with Cardinal Dolan of New York, I learned that one of his priests refused to stop celebrating public Masses; he caught the Coronavirus and the Cardinal presided at his burial.

In *First Corinthians 13*, St. Paul lists patience as one of the ways love is shown to others. Patience rather than unnecessary risk-taking is what we need at this time. We will return to some semblance of normal practice when it is safe to do so. Meanwhile, we rely on our faith to hold us up and we encourage our people – as many of you are doing in your communications with them and your live-streamed Masses and other virtual events – to bear up patiently under this burden.

The bishops of our Baltimore Province, our vicars general and our staffs are already discussing how to go about resuming public Masses and parish activities when that becomes feasible. I hold weekly teleconferences with our vicars forane and consultors. Any ideas you have are welcome. Getting back to normal will be more complicated than simply opening the doors and going back to what we did before. We must also cooperate with our public officials and health care experts, who, in my opinion, have risen to the challenge of protecting our citizens.

As you know, our diocesan Finance Office applied for assistance to our parishes, schools, diocesan administration and Catholic Charities through the Paycheck Protection Program of the CARES Act. We believe our parishes and schools will be included in the supplemental bill just passed by Congress yesterday. We will notify you as soon as we receive word of our applications' acceptance. The PPP will allow us to avoid furloughs and layoffs, at least in most cases. That is certainly to the good of our parish, school and CCWV employees

Brothers, continue to live in the "new normal" of physical separation from your people, while we deem it necessary, and share with one another creative ways to serve your parishioners in these unusual times. In the context of the COVID-19 disease, it strikes me that we are blessed to live and serve in a lightly populated, mostly rural State. On the other hand, getting itchy and acting foolishly could cause a surge of infections that could be devastating to our many elderly and infirm residents. Prudence sometimes means acting boldly; at other times, it means refraining from precipitous actions that violate reason. The current time requires that second kind of prudence.

Let us remain united in the Lord and in our love for our people. Kindly remember me in your prayers, as I pray for you and all our people each day. May the Lord, the Divine Physician and the Good Shepherd, hold you close to him and bless you and those you serve in every way. Peace be with you!

Fraternally in Christ,

+ Mark E. Brennan

+Mark E. Brennan

Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston