



DIOCESE OF GRAND RAPIDS

Office of the Bishop

March 17, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

Every year, the season of Lent reconnects us with the deepest thirst of the human heart: to know that God loves us, to know that God is present as we face our trials. When unexpected things happen, they can reveal to us the strength of our faith, or its fragility; the depth of our hope, or its frailty; the vibrancy of our love, or its feebleness. During this season of Lent we are facing an unprecedented trial with the COVID-19 virus. This pandemic calls for extraordinary measures to protect the common good, especially the most vulnerable among us.

I am grateful for those of you who observed my directive to stay home last Sunday and gather as a family for prayer and to watch the Mass via live broadcast. We rely on our faith in times such as these. I understand how difficult it is to not have access to the Eucharist on a Sunday, but we must continue to cooperate with orders issued by government and health care officials. Hopefully, our efforts will slow the spread of this virus so that we can once again gather together as quickly as possible.

Governor Whitmer's most recent executive order became effective today, March 17; it prohibits all gatherings of more than 50 people in a shared indoor space. **Therefore, the Diocese of Grand Rapids has decided to temporarily suspend ALL public Masses and all other liturgical and devotional services, effective immediately, through Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020.** With this suspension, all Catholics within the territory of the Diocese of Grand Rapids are granted a dispensation from their obligation of attending Sunday Mass through April 5. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals may continue to be celebrated outside of Mass with no more than 50 people in attendance. Our March 26 evening of penance, "The Light is ON for You" as well as individual confession times may continue as scheduled.

Our Catholic schools remain closed and all parish faith formation classes remain suspended until at least April 5 in accordance with Governor Whitmer's earlier mandate.

These have been difficult, but necessary decisions to make. The diocesan leadership team has been thoughtful and prudent in providing assistance to me. Science and recent experience have proven that participation in public gatherings significantly increases the risk of spreading this virus. As Catholics we must stand in solidarity with others and work together for the common good. We must recognize the value of every life and work together to protect all life.

During Lent we focus on the penitential practices of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. This time away from the reception of the Eucharist can help us gain a greater awareness of the importance the Eucharist has in our lives. May our spiritual hunger make us yearn for the time when we will be able to gather around the table of our Lord once again!

You are encouraged to unite yourself with Jesus during this time by making a [spiritual Communion](#). I invite families to use this time to pray together. Let us renew our efforts to turn to the Lord. Spiritual resources can be found on the diocesan website, [grdiocese.org](#). Our churches will remain open so that individuals and families may come for private prayer to experience the Lord's presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

Our priests will continue to celebrate Mass each day without a congregation. Christ remains present to us in various ways, especially in the Eucharist. Our hope is in God who promises to journey with us. May our love, our care, for one another be a reminder, and a proof, that yes, indeed, God is in our midst!

Let us continue to pray for all who are affected by COVID-19, for our health care officials and medical professionals who are working diligently to protect us during this time.

Let us turn to the calm and reassuring presence of our Blessed Mother during this time of uncertainty:

*Holy Virgin of Guadalupe,
Queen of the Angels and Mother of the Americas.
We fly to you today as your beloved children.
We ask you to intercede for us with your Son,
as you did at the wedding in Cana.*

*Pray for us, loving Mother,
and gain for our nation and world,
and for all our families and loved ones,
the protection of your holy angels,
that we may be spared the worst of this illness.*

*For those already afflicted,
we ask you to obtain the grace of healing and deliverance.
Hear the cries of those who are vulnerable and fearful,
wipe away their tears and help them to trust.*

*In this time of trial and testing,
teach all of us in the Church to love one another and to be patient and kind.
Help us to bring the peace of Jesus to our land and to our hearts.*

*We come to you with confidence,
knowing that you truly are our compassionate mother,
health of the sick and cause of our joy.*

*Shelter us under the mantle of your protection,
keep us in the embrace of your arms,
help us always to know the love of your Son, Jesus. Amen.*

Prayer of Archbishop Jose Gomez of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, and president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB).

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "David J. Walkowiak". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend David J. Walkowiak
Bishop of Grand Rapids