



# Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown

*Office of Vicar General*

2713 W Chestnut Avenue

Altoona, PA 16601

Phone: 814-695-5579

www.dioceseaj.org

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** All Priests and Deacons

**FROM:** (Very Rev.) Alan E. Thomas, VG *AET*

**RE:** Updated Parish Directives in Light of COVID-19 Pandemic

**DATE:** March 20, 2020

Things continue to change rapidly regarding how public authorities are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. An increasing number of reported COVID-19 cases in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and at least one death so far have led public officials to discourage people from leaving their homes so as to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus. As of yesterday evening, all non-life-sustaining businesses in Pennsylvania are required to close their physical locations. Bishop Mark wishes to remind all priests and deacons that, as is the case for public civil authorities, we too must also make the safety and wellbeing of our parishioners a top priority.

Priests and deacons should remind their parishioners to stay home as a way of avoiding COVID-19 for themselves and of becoming an unwitting source of infection to others. This does not mean isolation. Parishioners should be encouraged to contact one another through phones and other media, and they should know that they can continue to call parish offices. However, it is best if they limit their personal physical exposure to us and to other parishioners. With these principles in mind, Bishop Mark is issuing the following directives as a supplement or necessary change to those issued on March 17.

### Masses

Bishop Mark reminds all priests that Masses **must** be private. That is, they should be celebrated in the rectory or in another private area not open to the public. For those priests who are insistent on celebrating Mass in a church, Bishop Mark is, out of concern for public safety, forbidding the celebration of such Masses during the time that the church is open to the public.

He wishes to remind pastors of souls that they should advise their parishioners that opportunities for participating in Mass remotely are available. Should you have missed the announcement by Tony DeGol, here is information that can be shared with your parishioners.

Earlier this week, Bishop Mark announced the suspension of all public Masses in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown until further notice ([more](#)). During

this time, the diocese is committed to providing spiritual resources to the faithful through the use of technology.

Proclaim! will continue to air every Sunday at 10:30 a.m. on WATM ABC 23. The show will continue to be posted on the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown Facebook and Twitter social media platforms.

Bishop Mark will celebrate Sunday Masses, which will air every Sunday at 11:00 a.m. on WATM ABC 23 and at 9:00 p.m. on Atlantic Broadband Channel 9. The Masses will also be posted on the diocesan website and Facebook and Twitter social media platforms. Audio of the Liturgies will air Sundays at 10:00 a.m. on WFBG AM 1290.

Also during this time, daily Mass, celebrated by Father Matthew Baum at Prince of Peace Parish in Northern Cambria, is streamed on the parish website and the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown Facebook page.

### **MORE**

Other information and prayer resources are also posted on the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown Facebook page.

### **Church Access**

Parishioners are encouraged to pray from their homes, following the directives of healthcare officials. For reasons of public safety and the security of churches, Bishop Mark directs that all churches are to open at a maximum from 7am to 7pm. At the discretion of the pastor or administrator, these hours may be further restricted in individual parishes. Parishioners should not gather in groups of any sort.

**Depending upon developing circumstances, the Bishop may direct that further access to the churches be reduced or discontinued altogether.**

### **Confessions**

Currently, priests have permission to celebrate the sacrament of penance and may hear confessions upon request. Updating the protocol sent out three days ago, the bishop recommends that confessions be heard outside, with sufficient distance between the confessor and penitent. How to arrange this will be up to the individual priests. Priests who are uncomfortable with this proposal may forgo the celebration of the sacrament of penance at this point.

### **Shelter in Place**

If the state government issues a shelter-in-place restriction, then no confessions, except for those in danger of death, will be able to take place. If this restriction is enacted, all churches will need to close.

### **Appointments in Person**

Effective immediately, in-person appointments should be made only for those in critical situations. Otherwise, such appointments should be deferred until after this crisis has past.

## Funerals

In light of the changes required by public safety and health, funeral directors may have to change the way they are handling funerals. Therefore, it is important that priests and deacons be in consultation with funeral directors to determine the current practice. As always, special attention should be paid to public health and safety.

## Parish Staff

In light of the current directives issued by both state and local governments, pastors and administrators need to require members of their staff who can work from home to begin working from home immediately. Only those whose work requires them to be on parish property should be exempt from this policy. So, for example, it is necessary that maintenance personnel continue to make their rounds so as to protect parish churches and parish property. If you have questions about how to account for employees working at home and how to pay for this work, please feel free to contact Lynette McEvoy.

Of course, if the state government issues a shelter-in-place restriction, it may be impossible for any parish staff to be on site.