

Excerpt From Bishop Peter Eaton's Pastoral Letter To All Churches In The Diocese of Southeast Florida



Pastoral Letter from the Bishop

Saturday of the Second Week of Lent
14 March 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The news about the evolution of the coronavirus (COVID-19) changes daily, and I want to assure you that the health and safety of our congregations, schools, and special ministries remains our first priority. Following the commandment of Jesus, the actions that we are taking place the well-being of our neighbour at the forefront of all our decisions and actions.

In this time of uncertainty and confusion we proclaim the Gospel message of comfort and hope. As pastors it is our responsibility to make adequate pastoral provision for all our people, out of a deep and proper concern for their well-being. The goal now is the containment of the virus, and it is clear from governmental agencies that social distancing and the curtailing of all but the most urgent of activities is the best way to do this.

Accordingly, in my capacity as the chief pastor of the Church in Southeast Florida, I am directing that our churches shall suspend all gatherings for in-person worship, meetings, and all other events beginning this Sunday until Monday, 30 March, and I am dispensing the faithful from their ordinary Sunday obligation to attend public worship and priests from their ordinary obligation to celebrate or concelebrate the Sunday Eucharist for their communities.

I am also directing that our parish schools close for in-person teaching for the same period. If the local authority directs that public schools must remain closed beyond this date, we shall take this into serious consideration when assessing the extension of a period of closures.

I am directing those special ministries that are under the oversight of the Bishop and the Executive Board to curtail all but the most essential, life-saving services. Where there are feeding programmes, wherever possible I urge them to offer sealed foodstuffs that do not require direct handling for clients to take away and eat elsewhere.

Between now and 30 March, we shall be monitoring the situation continually and evaluating the closure. If it is necessary to extend this closure we shall do so based on the best available advice. We shall let you know of any decision in this regard as soon as we can do so prudently.

The one pastoral exception that clergy are free to make is to continue to open our churches to any recognised 12-step programmes that still wish to gather. 12-step programmes are life-saving and wherever it is safely possible they should be allowed to continue. Leaders and participants of such programmes must agree to abide by the current health and safety practices that have been issued to the general public.

Also, if funerals have already been scheduled and cannot be postponed, they must be celebrated, with the current restrictions. However, no new funerals should be planned for this period if at all possible.

Even during this period of closure, and afterwards when we are able to resume the regular ministries of our churches, schools, and special ministries, we shall still need to observe these guidelines and good practices:

1 – Follow all guidelines from governmental agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health. Be well informed from reliable sources, and act accordingly.

2 – If you are sick, or think that you may be getting sick, stay home. This is the fundamental rule for everyone, including clergy, at all times, but especially in the present situation. If you need help, please be in touch with your dean or with the Bishop's Office.

3 – Most should stay away from all gatherings for the time being. The population most at risk are our seniors, especially those with medical conditions. This will include a larger number of people than normal for us, as our average demographic is older. It is wise counsel for the elderly and those with respiratory and other chronic illnesses not be in large groups of people. It is also wise for those who live with or care for our seniors to be attentive to their activities and exposure to large groups.

4 – Best hygiene practices. Such practices, important at the best of times, are especially critical now. This is a good time to reinforce these practices with our children and young people:

- Catch it – Sneeze into a tissue.
- Trash it – Put the tissue in the trash.
- Kill it – Wash your hands.
- Do not touch your face unless you have washed your hands.

5 – No touch, low touch. The principle of “no touch” or “low touch” is sensible advice during this time, whether in liturgical, work, or social situations.

6 – For those most in need – ensure that they are not any more isolated than necessary. It is safer to suspend home communions so as to protect the vulnerable from possible infection, and the clergy have my support in this. However, clergy and other ministers can visit the homebound by telephone. However, those who are near death must not be denied the full consolation of the Church and the sacraments, and in these cases the clergy must make every effort to reach them and be with them.

7 – When public worship resumes in the future, communicants ought not to be allowed to intinct their own Hosts . While it has been permitted as a concession, intinction has always been a problematic practice, and this is made abundantly clear in the present situation. The most “sanitary” manner of receiving Holy Communion remains the traditional practice – receiving the Host in the hand or on the tongue, and then taking a sip from the Chalice. The medical experts available to the House of Bishops assure us that the Chalice, properly administered, is not a significant factor in either spreading or containing the virus.

8 – The restriction of the Chalice. When public worship resumes, it may still be prudent to restrict communion from the Chalice for a time certain. There will be further guidance about this if it is necessary. In all cases where the Chalice is restricted, the Chalice must always be consecrated at every Eucharist, and the celebrant must communicate from it, even if s/he is the only one to do so. The use of individual communion cups is not a practice that is consonant with the Eucharistic life of the Church, and does not have my endorsement. Neither does the practice of placing an intincted Host onto the communicant’s open palm. If intinction is to be practised at all, the priest or chalice minister must intinct the Host and place it carefully on the communicant’s tongue. If you are in doubt as to the appropriateness of a temporary practice for the administration of Holy Communion, please contact the Bishop’s Office.

9 – For now, all Holy Water fonts should be emptied.

10 – Create new ways for supporting community. Social distancing must not mean social isolation. At times like this, people need three things:

1. Community
2. Information
3. Agency (the ability to make informed decisions)

Please find ways of reaching out to your communities. This is not just the responsibility of the clergy; all of us can do this in our communities. Telephone calls, emails, and other forms of communication help us to maintain some kind of community in the face of the isolation that this virus is creating.

While I am dispensing the clergy for their obligation to provide Sunday Eucharistic and other worship for their communities, wherever it is possible and safe, I am asking the clergy to celebrate the Sunday Mass in church with one other person, and deliver a homily, and either live-stream the service or create a podcast and put it on your website, Facebook page, or other social media outlet. If there cannot be a celebration of the Eucharist in this way, think of other ways to provide your community with a homily or short service that the clergyperson records in the church or at home. Encourage everyone to spend the same time especially on Sundays in prayer, using the Book of Common Prayer, so that all may continue to be united in the prayer of the Church.

How can we still be church in these unprecedented circumstances? The answer to this will be as different as each of our communities. Some will be able to stream services, while others will find other ways of supporting our need for community in a time of pressure. Your community might want to read an appropriate Lenten book, and gather by zoom or conference call to discuss it. Be imaginative, and please do not underestimate the need that our people have for community.

Here is a free resource for worship at home:

<https://www.churchnext.tv/library/alternative-formation-for-christians-in-quarantine/114762/about/>

11 – Start making plans now for the resumption of normal community life. While we do not know how long the present situation will continue, it is wise to begin now to plan how your community will restore its normal community life and practices.

12 – Help us to communicate with everyone. Many of our people do not receive diocesan mailings and other information. This is a good time to ensure that we have your email list, so that all our people who use computers can receive mailings. Please send the email lists of your community to Eduardo (eduardo@diosef.org) and David (david@diosef.org) so that we can ensure as best we can that all our people are kept informed. Use phone chains and email chains to ensure that all in our congregations are receiving the information they need.

Because all events have been cancelled until 30 March, please encourage your people to look at the weekly Grapevine, as well as other e-announcements that you may receive, and please help us by ensuring that your communities know the news as it is published.

I am in regular contact with the deans by conference call, and we are keeping a close eye on this situation as it unfolds. Both Canon Tidy and I remain available to the clergy and wardens for any consultation. During these days that none of us could have foreseen, may God's peace comfort and sustain each one of you. You remain in my prayers every day.

*Keep us, good Lord,
under the shadow of your mercy
in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,
and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

With love and prayers,

+ Peter