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A Message to the Clergy and People

Tuesday after the Sunday after the Ascension
26 May 2020

*Stay Home. Stop the Spread. Save Lives.
If you have to go out, wear a mask.*

Extension of Closure

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Throughout this season of the COVID-19 virus, our church buildings and schools have been closed to serve the common good in protecting the health and well-being of all. We have been living by the protocols established by federal, state, and local government, as well as by public health agencies, to prevent further spread of the virus. In so doing we have been living by the commitment of our Baptismal Covenant and in faithfulness to the moral traditions of our Church.

In spite of the closure of our buildings, the life and work of the Church has not ceased. We celebrate the many and imaginative ways in which our congregations, schools and special ministries have continued to serve their communities, witnessing to the vitality of our shared ministry and mission. This vitality, marked by some wonderful creativity in our virtual presence, and our commitment to *Stay Home. Stop the Spread. Save Lives*, has enabled us to sustain the essential aspects of our life together as the Body of Christ in the face of the limitations and restrictions imposed upon us as an act of obedience to loving God and loving our neighbor.

In preparation for that time when it may be safe for us to re-enter and re-gather in our buildings, *On Being Faithful* addresses the key issues of effective communication, subsidiarity, sustainability, liability, and advocacy – issues that are best summarised, if not better articulated and captured, by the notion of accountability. Recognising that we are all accountable to God and to one another, we have remained the Church and essential witnesses of the Holy Spirit of God during this COVID time. And while there are external pressures to “reopen” our buildings, we must carefully discern the signs of this present moment. After careful consultation with the diocesan Re-entry Team, the Congregational Vitality team, the Deans, and other church leaders, we do not consider that at this time we have moved decisively from Season I to Season II as set out in the document *On Being Faithful*. This change of seasons expects conditions that have yet to be met in any part of our diocese. These conditions include a 14-day continual decrease in the number of new virus cases as reported by each of our respective county public health departments, in addition to a well-prepared plan for re-entry and re-gathering in our buildings following review and approval of the Bishop at least two weeks prior to re-entry.

Therefore, I am extending the closure of our congregations, schools, and special ministries until at least 30 June. Live-streaming and recording of worship may continue with the usual restrictions of the minimum number of people present for the conduct of the service. No other in-person activity is permitted.

We continue to monitor the situation very closely, and we shall move into Season II only when we are clear that it is safe to do so. This continued period of closure is the perfect opportunity for making preparations and ensuring that all is in order for the time when it becomes possible and safe to re-enter and re-gather.

I also remind everyone that, even when we are moving into Season II, no congregation, school, or special ministry will be required to resume in-person activity if the local leadership, in consultation with the Bishop’s Office, considers it still too risky to do so.

There are currently exceptions to the closure in the diocese for two essential services: some day-care ministries and some feeding programmes. These ministries have specific permission from the Bishop’s Office to function under strict conditions, and they may continue to operate during this extended closure.

I am deeply aware that we are entering a time when congregational leadership will be coming under increasing pressure. Some denominations are re-opening at the end of May or in June, and this will only turn up that pressure. I am also aware that the matter of re-entry and re-gathering in places of worship has become politicised, and this only adds to the complexity of discerning wise and prudent timing.

Effective communication is always critical and especially now during this season.

Please ensure that you have sent your up-to-date email list of your congregation to David (david@diosef.org), Eduardo (eduardo@diosef.org) and Jodi (cddiosef@gmail.com) so that all our people may be connected to our diocese.

Please also ensure that you and your leadership are reading the regular communications from the Congregational Vitality team, emailed out every Tuesday and Thursday.

The leadership of the diocese is motivated solely by our shared discernment of the moral imperative of the well-being of those who constitute our communities and those whom we serve, and in choosing caution in this ambiguous period we are focused on this issue alone.

If you have any questions, please direct them to the diocesan team (Canon Tidy, Cris Valdes, Susan Czolgosz, Canon Maconaughey, and Jodi Gonzales). We are here to help you and to support you in any way we can.

With love and prayers,

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