



Diocese of Springfield in Illinois

1615 West Washington Street • Springfield, Illinois 62702-4757

Phone (217) 698-8500 • Fax (217) 698-0802

May 28, 2020

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I write to express my gratitude and profound appreciation to the lay faithful of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois for the collective sacrifice you have made during this challenging and uncertain time of concern regarding the Novel Coronavirus. I am pleased to share the good news that we are now preparing to join together once more in person for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, beginning on the weekend of Trinity Sunday, June 6-7, 2020. As we do so, modifications, limitations, and precautions to maintain proper safe-distancing and recommended sanitary measures will be implemented and continue for some time to come. My dispensation from the obligation to attend Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation remains in effect for an indefinite period, until further notice.

Adhering to the public health guideline of limiting public gatherings to less than ten people for the past two months has effectively placed a substantial burden on the ability for our Church to engage in the free exercise of religion as intended by Jesus as a community gathered in faith throughout the entire Easter season and much of Lent. While our priests have offered Masses on behalf of the lay faithful during these most holy seasons of the Church, and individuals and families have prayed privately in their homes, our faith is not a private matter.

We are one body (1 Cor 12:12), and when we gather together in prayer, we know that Christ is in our midst (Matthew 18:20). Also, our faith is not a "virtual" faith; our Lord Himself became incarnate and gave us the sacraments, with their physical signs and hidden but real effects. Our Lord said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day" (John 6:53-54). Our faith is a tangible, physical, and communal reality. We simply cannot properly practice our faith apart from one another and separated from the physical realities of the sacraments (Hebrews 10:25). Therefore, the suspension of the Church's liturgical and sacramental life can only be temporary and cannot last indefinitely.

As Christian citizens, we have out of necessity temporarily accepted the suspension of the normal liturgical and sacramental practice of our faith as a profound and consequential sacrifice for the sake of the greater good. We have done so with particular concern to do our part in preventing a surge in hospitalizations that may have overwhelmed health system capacity in our cities and towns, as we saw unfolding in places like New York City earlier

this year. While concerns about the Coronavirus continue, there is no evidence of imminent threat to the capacity of our local health system, and most aspects of social and economic life are beginning to be restored. As such, it is time for us, as a people of faith, to begin a gradual return to our proper liturgical life as well.

We have all done our best to unite in prayer and acts of spiritual communion during this time, offering this sacrifice for the good of our neighbor. It is now time for the Church to return to the proper practice of the faith and celebration of the sacraments in order to be the ministers of God's grace that Christ has established us to be.

We are pleased to see that government officials have now recognized that houses of worship are essential and that people of faith need to gather together in this uncertain time and can do so safely and responsibly, following safe-distance standards with guidance to limit attendance to 25% of the capacity of the worship space, along with hygienic and sanitary safety measures.

With this in mind, I am announcing that public Masses and other liturgical celebrations will be allowed to resume on the weekend of June 6-7, provided parish leadership teams attend a mandatory training webinar and complete a readiness checklist.

As we take this step together, there are a few important things to know:

1. **Mass attendance is Optional, not Obligatory:** While the community health concern has ebbed, the Coronavirus continues to be a serious health matter, especially for the elderly, those with underlying health conditions, and those with compromised immune systems. Therefore, as we begin this journey back to the proper life of the Church in our diocese, the dispensation from the obligation to attend Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation remains in effect until further notice. Those who are not well must remain at home and those who believe they are at risk of infection should exercise prudence.
2. **Safe-Distancing, Attendance Limits, and Other Precautions:** Consistent with government guidelines, the diocese is setting a 25% maximum occupancy for worship spaces in public liturgies. Further, the diocese has formulated specific guidelines for the safe return to public Masses and sacramental life, derived primarily from the Thomistic Institute, which were shared by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The Thomistic Institute guidelines were prepared by a team of national experts, including both liturgical expertise as well as infectious disease, medicine, and public health expertise. They are the most comprehensive and well-researched guidelines available. These guidelines articulate detailed procedures for ensuring safe-distancing and sanitary safety while preserving the integrity and dignity of the sacraments.

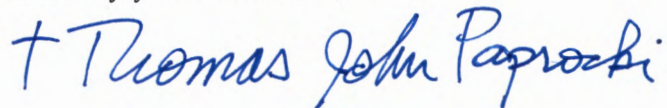
3. **Local Parish Variations:** Our 129 parishes vary greatly in number of parishioners and in the size and layout of their physical worship spaces. Some of our churches have a capacity of several hundred people and offer ample space to seat families with multiple empty pews between them, while maintaining far more effective safe-distancing than is possible at the local grocery store. Meanwhile, as public health guidelines move to allow for groups of 50 or more, over time, several of our small, rural churches will struggle to accommodate congregations with proper safe distance. Therefore, each of our parishes will be expected to follow the Thomistic Institute guidelines as directed by our Diocesan staff.
4. **Training and Support for Pastors, Staff, and Volunteers:** Diocesan staff have prepared web-based training for pastors and their teams to help them understand, interpret, and apply the Thomistic Institute's standards for the safe reintroduction of public Mass and the sacraments. This training is being hosted live and will be available for replay.
5. **Sacraments of Initiation at Parishes:** As previously announced, due to the extraordinary circumstances of this time, I have delegated authority to pastors to administer the Sacraments of Initiation. With first priority for those children who have not yet received their First Holy Eucharist, and preserving the proper sequence of the sacraments (Baptism, Reconciliation, Confirmation, First Holy Eucharist) pastors will determine a plan to complete the initiation of all children and adults whose sacraments were postponed due to the shelter-in-place order. Just like other public Masses, these celebrations will need to follow the proper safe-distancing and precautionary procedures, which may result in multiple celebrations in larger parishes in order to limit the size of congregations.

The full details of the diocesan standards for safe public liturgies is posted on the Parish Reopening Plan website (<https://www.dio.org/parishreopeningplan>).

This milestone is just one step toward returning to the proper life of the Church, and many modifications, constraints, and precautions will be used to limit any potential resurgence of infection in our communities. We must remain vigilant and cautious of our physical health and that of our neighbor, even as we return to the proper care of our spiritual health.

With prayerful good wishes, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Thomas John Paprocki". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

Bishop Paprocki has announced that public Masses will resume in the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. Below are the essential facts regarding this announcement.

- **What:** Public Masses will resume, with limitations and modifications noted below. Also, as previously announced, Bishop Paprocki has delegated authority to pastors to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation. Thus parishes, following the same standards for safe-distancing and sanitary precautions, will be allowed to complete the initiation of children and adults who have been properly prepared.
- **When:** Public liturgical celebrations are permitted beginning on the weekend of Trinity Sunday, June 6-7, 2020, with attendance up to 25% of the worship space's capacity.
- **How:** Public liturgies will follow safe-distancing and sanitary safety measures as outlined by the Thomistic Institute and as recommended by the "COVID-19 Guidance for Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services," issued by the Illinois Department of Public Health, with specific application to the particular worship space. Following these guidelines will entail closing off of pews and physical spacing in the worship space, which, for larger parishes, may in turn require sign-ups or alphabetical rotations of parishioners and families to limit crowd size. Mass schedules may be altered as a result. There will also be modifications to aspects of the Mass, such as avoiding physical contact at the sign of peace, maintaining safe distance in the communion line, etc. Given the diversity in the sizes of our parishes and physical layout of the church building and worship space, each parish will provide its own specific approach. Please refer to your parish website for details.
- **Why:** As a people of faith, we have experienced a uniquely challenging spiritual journey during the Lent and Easter seasons. We have been physically separated and unable to celebrate Mass together for months, with the lay faithful fasting from the Eucharist, denying themselves the bread of life. During this time, hundreds of children and adults who prepared for initiation into the Church have been waiting at the gate, as celebrations of the sacraments of Confirmation and First Holy Eucharist have been postponed. The liturgical and sacramental life of the Church are the very heart of her mission and reason for being. In the liturgy and in the sacraments, the mysteries of salvation and God's healing and saving grace are made present and effective. They are what unite us to Christ and to one another, in His mystical body. While those who do not share our faith may perceive the Mass and sacraments as optional or "nice to have," we know that there is nothing more essential, more necessary, more urgently needed than the grace of God made present in the liturgy and sacraments.