



ARCHDIOCESE OF MIAMI

Office of the Archbishop

April 20, 2020

Brothers,

Several of you have contacted me asking when we can resume the normal liturgical life of our parishes. I know all of you are anxious to do so. Now that we are entering the Second Week of Easter and marking a month since the suspension of Masses with a congregation, all of us are feeling some “cabin fever” and we are “itching” to get back to normality. However, after consulting with civil authorities, we are not yet able to resume “public assemblies”.

Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties are the epicenter of the pandemic here in Florida. These three counties count for about 50% of infections and 50% of deaths due to COVID-19. The number of infections has not reached its “apex” yet – but, perhaps it will in another couple of weeks. Apparently social distancing has helped to “flatten the curve”. However, “flattening the curve” does not mean the novel corona virus will disappear. It does mean, however, preventing our hospitals from being overwhelmed by a surge in infections.

So, apparently, while we wait for a vaccine (a year or two away), “social distancing” will be part of the new normal we will have to get used to. And, as we prepare for that day when our churches can reopen for worship with our parishioners in attendance, several things will have to be considered and weighed seriously.

First, “social distancing” will be the new normal until a vaccine is available. Thus, those vulnerable to contracting the corona virus (i.e., the elderly 65 and older and those with underlying conditions) will be told, or at least encouraged, to stay home and self-isolate. If this is the case, then before we can begin public Masses again, we might be forced to determine the ability and/or willingness of priests who fall into the category of the “vulnerable” to place themselves – or, if they are infected but asymptomatic, to place others at risk for infection. The same would be true of deacons and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion and other ministers. Some people over 65 are healthy and vigorous and perhaps are not so vulnerable to the virus. However, there are a lot of priests, deacons, extraordinary ministers with various health problems that place them particularly at risk. So, the Archdiocese and parishes would have to make provisions to relieve them, until at least there is a vaccine. Complicating all this to date, is, of course, the lack of appropriate testing that is accurate, quick and cost effective, especially in identifying those who are asymptomatic but infectious.

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Second, there are several questions to be answered once “church services” are restored. Would we need to take each congregant’s temperature before admitting them into the assembly? If we must space them six feet apart, what do we do with “overflow? Or do we admit only a certain number of parishioners who RSVP confirming their attendance? Would everybody in church be required to wear a mask (since singing can “spray” droplets from someone’s mouth)? Would priest and others distributing Holy Communion be required, for their protection, to wear a mask and gloves during distribution? Would the pews have to be sanitized before and after every Mass?

As you can see, these are difficult hurdles for us to navigate as we emerge on the other side of this crisis.

Let me offer you some possible responses to questions frequently raised by many of your parishioners on different matters:

Why are the Church doors locked? People need to pray!

Well, Church doors were locked in most cases for security reasons or to prevent vandalism – even before the pandemic. Yes, many parishes have adoration chapels – but they are usually too small for proper “social distancing”.

Why are priests not celebrating Masses?

Priests are celebrating Masses. Most of you have followed my instructions to continue to celebrate daily Mass and many of you are livestreaming even daily Masses. In fact, at these Masses, even though there is not a congregation present, there are assisting a small number of the faithful – as readers, cantors, musicians, servers, etc.

Why can’t we do “parking lot” Masses like other places?

Other places are not the epicenter of the virus outbreak in Florida as Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade are. “Stay at home” mandates discourage any event that would gather large numbers of people. Some municipalities have mandates that are quite draconian. Since civil authorities have urged citizens to stay at home, it would be imprudent for us to encourage large gatherings, at least until we are on the other side of the “curve” and those mandates are relaxed.

Why are funerals forbidden?

They are not – there may be a priest who should not preside (because he is vulnerable), but he is to find someone who can. Parishes are doing funerals all the time – with restrictions on number of attendees. The same is true of weddings.

Why can't I go to Confession?

Confessions are being heard in the Archdiocese of Miami. Again, some priests may not be available because of need to self-isolate. However, as you know, right before Holy Week, the president announced that the next few weeks would be the worse in terms of deaths and infections and so "stay at home" mandates were given. So, to discourage large gatherings of people leaving their homes, "drive-by" confessions, "drive by" palms and "drive by" communions were suspended. Parishes are supposed to be open – the phones being answered, etc. If a sick call is received, it should be answered and the person attended to; if someone comes to the office and asks to go to Confession, he or she should be attended to.

Why has the Church abandoned us?

We have not! The clergy of this Archdiocese have worked "creatively, prudently and pastorally" to be present to our people. Parishes have organized "phone trees", groups to shop for elderly members, catechesis by "zoom". We continue educating our Catholic school kids online. We do livestream of Masses and other devotions, we have TV Masses, PSA on television and radio, Radio Paz continues to broadcast 24/7, etc.

Our goal is, of course, to reunite our people with Mass and the regular participation in the sacraments.

But, as outlined above, we have several hurdles to overcome here in South Florida, the epicenter of the contagion in our state. Arcadia or Lake City, Florida do not face the same challenges we face here, neither does Las Cruces. Until there is a vaccine, the corona virus will continue to infect people – most people will recover, some will die. But we do not want to be responsible for a greater spread.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



Most Reverend Thomas Wenski
Archbishop of Miami