



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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May 23, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am happy to let you know of an important breakthrough in our state that will allow for greater worship opportunities for all people. This breakthrough is consistent with our need to protect public health as we take significant precautions in how we come together and pray. In the next couple of days, Governor Walz will issue a new executive order that allows faith communities to accommodate up to 250 people for worship services — both inside and outside — beginning May 27, 2020. Governor Walz and his administration hope that when faith communities gather, they will do so consistent with public health guidance. We pledge to be good citizens when offering worship in our communities and to work with public officials to promote the common good.

As you know, the Catholic bishops of Minnesota believe that the prior rules limiting faith-based gatherings to ten people unreasonably burdened the liberty of the Church to bring Mass and the sacraments to the faithful. Because we believe the Eucharist is the bread of everlasting life and the source and summit of our faith, we were prepared to move ahead and allow larger Masses without support from public officials. The life of faith was receiving unequal treatment, as allowances were made for other, less essential activities. The new executive order removes that unreasonable burden on the Church and allows us to bring the Eucharist, the food of everlasting life, to our community.

I want to express my gratitude to Governor Walz, Lieutenant Governor Flanagan, and the other members of the governor's team. I am so thankful we could come to a consensus about a reasonable and safe path forward for our state that allows greater numbers of people to safely return to worship. I hope the governor and his team have a better appreciation of both our duty to provide sacramentally for the good of our flock and our unwavering Catholic commitment to working for the common good. With the Eucharist as the source and summit of Christian life, it should not be surprising that the Church jealously guards its jurisdiction over the sacraments and entrusts to each bishop the responsibility to be "moderator, promoter and guardian" of the Church's liturgical life.

The bishops of Minnesota are also grateful for the help of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty which provided sound legal counsel in defense of the liberty of the Church to offer the sacraments, especially in our conversations with the Walz Administration. Thank you also to the law firm Sidley Austin for its work on this matter.

Although we had previously announced that Mass could begin May 26, we need to move that back one day to May 27 to allow the executive order raising the allowed capacity for gatherings to go into effect. We will also make small adjustments to our protocols consistent with the

guidance issued by the Minnesota Department of Health. We can be thankful that the removal of the limitations will allow us to have Mass in the Easter season and come together on Sunday, May 31 for the celebration of Pentecost.

I want to emphasize that we bishops of Minnesota have told our pastors and parishes that they should only return to public Mass when they are able to follow the “Parish Preparedness COVID-19 Plan for a Return to Public Masses” and the protocols it lays out. If a parish is not confident that they are ready, they should not begin public Masses. Period. And if the faithful feel safer at home, they should not come to church. Period. We encourage those over the age of 65 or who are especially vulnerable to not attend but we will certainly not turn them away if they choose to come. The dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday remains in place.

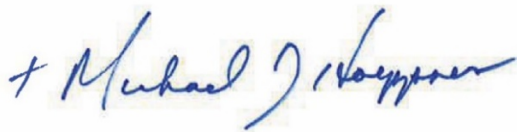
I am grateful for the work and sacrifice of our priests, parish staffs, and parish leadership teams. Our priests have been on the front lines of this pandemic, ministering to the sick in their homes, hospitals, and care facilities. They continue to place themselves at risk for the love of their brothers and sisters.

I want to express my gratitude also to all the faithful of the Diocese of Crookston. While unable to receive the Holy Eucharist — the very Body and Blood of Jesus — for the past two months, you have creatively and patiently found other ways to live your faith. You have made spiritual communions, supported your sisters and brothers in need, supported your parish, and stepped up to help others. And for those of you who are still unable to join together for the Holy Eucharist, I thank you for your understanding and thank our priests and parishes for continuing to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass through digital means.

Please remember to pray for all those who have lost their lives in this pandemic, for those who grieve them and for those who are sick and care for them. Also pray for the women and men in the health care field who daily risk their health to take care of our sisters and brothers who are sick. Please pray for an end to this pandemic.

And may God bless our country as we prepare to remember this Memorial Day weekend those who fought for it. Thank you.

Sincerely, in the name of the Lord Jesus,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael J. Hoeppner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Rev. Michael J. Hoeppner
Bishop of Crookston