April 3, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters,

Blessings to you in Holy Week. I am praying for you every day. For the first time in our lives, we are not gathering for Masses at this most solemn time of the year. This is unprecedented; it feels strange and empty. It is painful for all of us, and I am writing to express my concern and to offer encouragement to you. In times of trial, the words of Scripture lift my spirits and renew my faith. So, I will begin with a quote from Psalm 118, which we pray every Easter Sunday.

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.”

Elderly and people with health conditions are apprehensive and isolated. Many of our friends or family members are healthcare workers whose lives are in jeopardy, and we are anxious for them. Others have lost their jobs, and business owners are experiencing huge financial losses. The Lord is close to every single person. Even if you cannot pray with your community at Mass, the Lord is with you. “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his mercy endures forever.”

Many of you are asking why I suspended all Masses. The Eucharist is an immense source of grace. Only in an emergency situation should a bishop cease Masses. To make prudent decisions, I formed a COVID-19 Response Team. The team has four pastors from Cheyenne and Laramie and three lay leaders from the Chancery Office. In addition, I have been consulting two doctors who are life-long Catholics and have practiced medicine for 40 years. Thus, our perspective includes pastors who have dedicated their life to your spiritual welfare, lay leaders who bring the view from the pew, while serving the whole diocese, and Catholic doctors with medical expertise. Our decisions are based on faith in God and key values that uphold the common good.

An essential value is solidarity. We have an obligation to do all we can to help prevent the transmission of this virus, especially to the elderly and people with underlying health conditions. Solidarity with the most vulnerable means that we must act as one family to the elderly and those with health problems. We need to act so as to prevent any person from being infected.

This is in accord with the principle of “salvation of souls.” Salvation is not merely spiritual. Jesus came to redeem the whole person – body, mind, and soul. Caring for the sick is intrinsic to his mission, and our Catholic heritage includes saints who founded hospitals. Also, the purpose of the Sacraments is “to sanctify men, to build up of the Body of Christ, and finally, to give worship to God” (CCC, 1123). At this time, gathering for the sacraments would endanger the Body of Christ because of the inherent risk of the transmission of the coronavirus.

As your bishop, I need to consider your spiritual needs together with your overall well-being, and the common good of all people, not just Catholics. We must be responsible citizens in Wyoming. Ceasing public Mass is a drastic measure, but it will mitigate the transmission of COVID-19.

Several weeks ago, Italy closed their churches, then some pastors had outdoor Masses. But their bishops and the police told them to stop. Those Italian priests are good pastors who want to feed their people spiritually. But the result was that more people were exposed to COVID-19 and are dying. In Italy more than 14,000 people have died, and in one diocese 11 priests have died!
When I suspended Masses, I was not just thinking of the next few weeks or months, but the next ten years. If we have several priests die from the virus, then instead of months with no Mass, some communities could go for ten years without Mass.

In these unsettling times, the mystery of the cross consoles us. St. Paul said to the Romans, “Since God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for the sake of us all, then can we not expect that with him he will freely give us all his gifts? . . . What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or peril, or the sword? No, we come through all these things triumphant and victorious, by the power of him who loved us.” (Rm. 8:32-37)

How can you celebrate Holy Week and Easter in a way that will feed you spiritually? Think back to the first Christians. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus felt defeated, but as they were walking and discussing Jesus’ death, the Risen Lord joined them. As he explained the Scriptures to them, their hearts were burning with his love (Luke 24:13-32). He comes to us as we read the Scriptures. One sign of his presence is that our hearts burn with love, joy, and peace.

The Risen Christ is present to you in his Word. The Catechism says, “the Church has always venerated the Scriptures as she venerates the Lord’s Body. She never ceases to present to the faithful the bread of life, taken from the one table of God’s Word and Christ’s Body” (CCC, 103). In these days without the Eucharist, receive the Lord in his Word. On Holy Thursday, read John 13 together, and wash one another’s feet. On Good Friday, read the Passion (John 18-19), with each person reading a portion, then venerate a cross and offer prayers for the sick, healthcare workers, etc. On Easter Sunday, read the resurrection story in Matthew 28 or John 20 where the first Christians were locked in a room in fear. That is how they spent the first Easter!

A second way to receive the Lord is to love your neighbor. In 1 John 4:12 it says, “as long as we love each other, God remains in us and his love comes to perfection in us.” When you’re lonely, then reach out to others who are lonely. When we help others, God fills us with new life. This is the paschal mystery. Christ poured out his life on the cross, and the Father raised him from the dead. Loving others is a grace similar to the Eucharist. Let selfless love be Eucharist for you. Watch how your heart is filled with the new life of the resurrection through love for others.

To stop the transmission of the coronavirus, we are urged to practice social distancing. But it is better to practice physical distancing and social closeness. That is, we need to avoid any groups, but we cannot survive without human contact. We need social closeness. Please help your local priest to organize outreach within your parish and community. Then call others on the phone, write letters, or make a meal for someone. “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Lk. 6:36). Then you will experience the Easter Joy of the Risen Lord.

Be mindful that we are united as the Body of Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells in us and unites us to the Lord Jesus and to one another. Because of the Spirit, our prayer for one another is powerful. Every day, I pray for the clergy, religious, and laity of the Diocese of Cheyenne. Please pray for me.

Julian of Norwich lived in England when the Black Plague killed over half the people in her village. She brought all of her questions and doubt to God who said to her: “I am able to make everything well, and I know how to make everything well, and I wish to make everything well, and thou shalt see for thyself that all manner of thing shall be well.” All shall be well!

Peace in Christ,

Bishop Steven Biegler