

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF BRIDGEPORT
238 JEWETT AVENUE • BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT 06606
(P)203-416-1352 • (F)203-371-8323

To: All Clergy
From: Bishop Frank J. Caggiano
Re: Spiritual Sustenance Without the Reception of the Sacraments
Date: March 27, 2020

Some of the lay faithful, understandably, are deeply concerned that they are unable to receive Holy Communion while public Masses are suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, as restrictions increase, some fear that access to Absolution in the Sacrament of Confession or Anointing of the Sick may be limited in the days ahead, though the Diocese will continue to do everything possible to ensure the availability of these Sacraments.

In order to console those who are temporarily unable to avail themselves of the Sacraments of the Catholic Church and having a “desert experience,” I ask Pastors to distribute the following FAQs with your parishioners. The responses below are meant to provide a succinct answer and not offer an exhaustive teaching on each subject raised.

I treasure the spiritual nourishment I receive in Holy Communion. What can I do now?

Throughout the Church’s history there were times when the Sacraments were not available because of persecution, lack of priests, calamity, war or illness. Even in the Bible we hear of times of Exile when God’s people were taken far from their homeland and far from the Lord’s temple. But God, in His goodness, provides grace and strength to those who seek Him even in these times of trial. His love for us is demonstrated most perfectly in the Eucharist. But even when we are separated from our churches because of illness, His love for us remains “*always, until the end of the age*” (Mt. 28:20).

In her wisdom, the Church encourages those who cannot receive the Eucharist to make an Act of Spiritual Communion. Saint John Paul II reminded us of the value of this, citing the words of Saint Teresa of Jesus: “*When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you*” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 34).

How do I make an Act of Spiritual Communion?

If you are viewing an electronic version of the Mass, you would say this or a similar prayer at the time of Holy Communion: *“My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.”*

If you cannot view the Mass electronically, you may set aside some quiet time in your home for the prayer. Make the Sign of the Cross, reflect on God’s word with a reading from Sacred Scripture (the Mass readings for the day if available to you), call to mind your prayer intentions, pray the Our Father and the prayer of Spiritual Communion and close with the Sign of the Cross.

What can I do to grow in the spiritual life while the Eucharist is not available to me?

This extraordinary time in our lives offers each one of us an opportunity to read and meditate more on Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, or to do some spiritual reading from the great writers of the Church’s history or the lives of the saints. Also, we could take up – again or for the first time – prayerful devotions, such as the Rosary, Novenas and the Chaplet of Divine Mercy.

Also, some parishes are providing online resources that include religious videos, faith sharing, Bible study groups, etc. Check your parish website for more information.

Where can I watch Mass live-streamed or taped?

You could check local listings for Catholic Masses on TV, and many parishes are also offering Mass to be viewed on their parish websites. For a full list of live-streaming Masses in the Diocese, please check (<https://www.bridgeportdiocese.org/coronavirus-resources-and-information/>).

My celebration of Sunday Mass is posted on the Diocesan website at 8:00 AM every Sunday morning (www.bridgeportdiocese.org).

Also, I will celebrate Holy Week and Triduum liturgies from Saint Augustine Cathedral. They will be live-streamed on the Diocesan website. This is a wonderful opportunity to gather with me in prayer for the entire Diocese in the midst of these challenging times.

The schedule is as follows:

Chrism Mass:	Thursday, April 9 th at 10:00 AM
Mass of the Lord’s Supper:	Thursday, April 9 th at 7:00 PM
The Passion of the Lord:	Friday, April 10 th at 3:00 PM
Easter Vigil in the Holy Night:	Saturday, April 11 th at 7:00 PM

Is Confession being offered in parishes in the Diocese of Bridgeport?

Yes, but many of the planned schedules may have changed or been cancelled due to restrictions on gatherings.

Confession is God's gift to us – a gift that sets us free from sin. Through Confession we can repent and recover deep friendship with God. With Absolution we have the certainty of His forgiveness and healing.

Confession is available in parishes either by appointment or scheduled times, but, during this pandemic, both the priest and the penitent must observe safe social distancing. Please check your parish schedules for more information.

What should I do if I am unable to go to Confession?

Since the schedule for Confessions may have changed, as well as our availability to come together, you may have challenges connecting with your priest for regular confession during the rest of this Lenten season. If that happens, do not despair. These are not normal circumstances.

During World War II, at a time and place where the Sacrament of Confession was not readily available, Saint Maximilian Kolbe exhorted faithful Catholics, *“Whoever can, should receive the Sacrament of Penance. Whoever cannot, because of prohibiting circumstances, should cleanse his soul by acts of perfect contrition.”*

While we believe that the Sacrament of Confession gives us the fullness of God’s mercy, we know that God is never far from the one who seeks Him, and His power to forgive extends far beyond the confessional. If for these days the Sacrament of Confession is not able to be scheduled, you can make an act of perfect contrition before God. *“Perfect”* contrition comes from a pure love of God above all else. *“Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible”* (CCC #1452). It is a prayerful way to begin the process of receiving God’s healing and mercy, a process that will be culminated when you go to Confession at a later time.

Part of this could include the words of the **Act of Contrition**: *“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.”*

Has Pope Francis spoken about this?

Yes. Pope Francis approached the question this way during his homily at Mass on March 20th: *“I know that many of you go to confession before Easter... Many will say to me: ‘But Father...I can't leave the house and I want to make my peace with the Lord. I want Him to embrace me...”*

How can I do that unless I find a priest?'. Do what the catechism says. It's very clear. If you don't find a priest to go to confession, speak to God. He's your Father. Tell Him the truth: 'Lord. I did this and this and this. Pardon me.' Ask His forgiveness with all your heart with an act of contrition, and promise Him, 'afterward I will go to confession.' You will return to God's grace immediately. You yourself can draw near, as the catechism teaches us, to God's forgiveness, without having a priest at hand."

Does this eliminate the need for Confession for the rest of us?

The Sacrament of Confession is and remains the ordinary means Christ has given us for receiving forgiveness for our sins, and a regular reception of this Sacrament is a necessary and beautiful part of our lives in Christ.

The Church recognizes that extraordinary circumstances sometimes arise which can limit some people's ready access to this Sacrament, and thus provides accommodations and suggestions for receiving God's mercy when access to the Sacrament of Confession is impeded. Yet none of the accommodations made during this extraordinary time should be understood as obviating the need for Confession, especially when this pandemic has passed.

Is Anointing of the Sick suspended in the Diocese of Bridgeport?

No. Thankfully, priests continue to provide the Anointing of the Sick to the faithful who request it, but they have been asked to use caution for any anointings during this period by using cotton swabs and gloves for the Sacrament.

It may be the case, however, that a priest may not be permitted to anoint a patient in a hospital or nursing home under quarantine, especially if that patient has the COVID-19 virus. Those situations will be treated on a case-by-case basis and will involve the input of healthcare administrators and caregivers.

What about the Sacraments for those in healthcare facilities with COVID-19? The protocols of the facilities sometimes will not allow contact with the priests for health reasons. Can they receive Absolution or Anointing of the Sick in hospitals or nursing homes?

Regarding Absolution from sins, know that hospital and healthcare priest chaplains can be granted permission to absolve sins *collectively* due to the gravity of the outbreak. Here is how it could be done: *"At the entrance to hospital wards, where the infected faithful in danger of death are hospitalized, using as far as possible and with the appropriate precautions the means of amplifying the voice so that absolution may be heard."* This would grant the sick the consolation and grace of forgiveness without individual Confession. Many of the most afflicted would not be able to confess normally because of their illness. The priest can also invoke the Apostolic Pardon for the dying, granting them a full remission of all sins.

Regarding Anointing of the Sick, the problem is that this Sacrament requires close contact with the infected. Because this is not always possible and the need is so great, the Church is granting a Plenary Indulgence (remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins) to those who upon death find themselves unable to receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and of Holy Communion “*provided that they are duly disposed and have recited a few prayers during their lifetime (in this case the Church makes up for the three usual conditions required).*” For the attainment of this indulgence the use of the crucifix or the cross is recommended.

The Church, in imitation of Christ, would never forget her children in their hour of greatest need, even if distance must change the way that comfort is offered.

Don't I have an “Easter Duty” to receive Holy Communion?

One of the Precepts of the Catholic Church is that the faithful are to receive the Eucharist at least during the Easter season. If Masses were to be suspended for a portion of the Easter Season (which has not happened yet), and there was a problem receiving Communion to fulfill the Easter Duty, the law of the Church allows this to be completed at another time during the year.

When this pandemic is over, do I need to confess that I missed Mass for these weeks?

I dispensed all Catholics in the Diocese from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass beginning the weekend of March 14-15. Now, of course, public Masses are suspended. Therefore, one does not have to confess missing Sunday Mass after March 14th, as long as one would have attended Mass if possible. If a person missed Sunday Mass due to negligence before then, the sin should be confessed.

During this unusual period when Masses are suspended, we should still try to honor Sunday as the Lord's day, a day for reflection, prayer, rest and family. If possible, Catholics should participate in Sunday Masses that are broadcasted electronically. If that is not possible, they should aside time each Sunday for reading of the Scriptures (preferably from the day) and prayer.

While we hope that by the beginning of May we will be able to gather again in our churches for worship, we will be guided by state and local health officials regarding that decision.

If God provides grace to us when we cannot attend Mass, why should I bother going to Sunday Mass at all when the public Masses resume?

While it is true that God “*himself is not bound by His sacraments*” (CCC #1257), we are bound by them and have a serious obligation before God to attend Sunday Mass.

“The Eucharist is ‘the source and summit of the Christian life’” (CCC #1324). The Mass is the same sacrifice as the sacrifice of the Cross, and Jesus is the High Priest who offers His life for the salvation of the world. Catholics not only have an obligation to attend Sunday Mass, but

to do so is beneficial to their well-being here on earth and through eternity. At Mass we are gathered together as a community of faith to honor and glorify God, to thank Him for His graces and obtain graces and blessings to become the saints we are called to be.

In these days of trial, we are forced to be physically separated from the Eucharist, and possibly from the ready reception of the other Sacraments. We have all experienced similar moments of painful separation throughout life, as when spouses must be apart for work or when children cannot be close to parents because of education or military service. These moments are extraordinary and painful, but sometimes when we are forced to live without the things that were always readily available to us, it makes us appreciate what was right before us all the time.

When this time of separation ends and the Sacraments of God's love are once again offered before us, then our exile will be over. That day will be a time of rejoicing. Returning to the Mass will be a cause for joy, not burden.

This whole experience has been difficult for me. For what can I offer any suffering I am experiencing?

Each one of us needs to ask the Lord to enlighten our minds and to show us as individuals how our personal suffering can be offered up and sanctified during this crisis. Some ideas, among others, may be to offer up one's worries, sadness, fear and longing for the Eucharist for:

- all those afflicted with COVID-19 and their families;
- for those who have died from the virus;
- for healthcare personnel courageously serving those in need;
- for researchers searching for a cure;
- for government and civil leaders, who bear great burdens and uncertainty.

During this period of "Eucharistic fast," we may also want to remember and pray for the many Catholics throughout the world who are only able to receive the Sacraments on rare occasions. Especially when this is due to persecution, they live out their Catholic faith heroically, armed with the hope of receiving the Sacraments that are normally available to us every day. While our trial is temporary, some of our brothers and sisters in the Faith have little reason to believe that their situation will change. We are, possibly more than ever, united in solidarity with them.

+ + +

Throughout this current crisis we should remember that the Lord will grant us the grace we need to persevere, to remain steadfast and to grow in faith, hope and love. Knowing "that all things work for good for those who love God" (Rom. 8:28), we daily entrust ourselves to the care and protection of our Blessed Mother. At the same time, we eagerly await the day when the doors of our churches are open again and we are able to worship at Mass together in person. At the end of this pandemic, may we all appreciate and love the Mass even more, and may those who were unfortunately not in the habit of attending Mass on Sunday be given the grace to come home and to join their brothers and sisters in praising God.

