



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP  
DIOCESE OF MEMPHIS

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## DECREE

At the beginning of March, as we read about the presence of a new and virulent *coronavirus*, and how this new virus endangered the health of the people living in Memphis and all of west Tennessee, the people of the Diocese of Memphis have shown an extraordinary strength of character, through your loving obedience to the Lord Jesus, in following His *Golden Rule*. We have cared for the health of our neighbor (Matthew 7.12), by the suspension of public Masses and by your fasting from the *living bread*, the Holy Eucharist and doing without the joy of Sunday and the fellowship of our faith-filled parishes.

This new COVID 19 *continues* to be a threat to the common good. We must be vigilant in combatting this threat. By the grace of God, by your participation in “staying in place” and by the dedicated work of physicians and nurses and health department personnel, the rapid spread of COVID 19 has slowed down in many of the twenty-one counties in west Tennessee that make up our Diocese. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of April, Governor Lee issued an Executive Order in which he reminded all of the freedom of each faith community to offer the public worship of God; and additionally, the civil authorities of Shelby County and the city of Memphis have eased “stay at home” mandates as of the 4<sup>th</sup> of May.

And so, as of Monday, the 4<sup>th</sup> day of May 2020, please know the following:

**FIRST**, that the dispensation from the obligation to attend holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation offered on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March continues in effect through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. In particular, those who are experiencing any sickness, those with any health vulnerability and those fearful of the possible infection of COVID 19 should stay at home.

**SECOND**, please know that the suspension of public Masses that began on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March is lifted *as of 4:00 P.M. on Saturday the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2020*, with adherence to the required instructions and restrictions listed below:

1. The withholding of the *cup of blessing* (chalices for Holy Communion) and the withholding of any physical exchange of peace during Mass, begun on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March continues in effect through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020.
2. Aside from the different fora of public worship (the celebration of the Word and the Sacraments), there are to be no social gatherings in the parish of more than ten people, through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020.
3. A six foot “physical distancing” is to be aggressively maintained in every assembly of worship, through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020.

*I will give you a new heart    Ezekiel 36:26*

4. Because of “physical distancing”, and because singing is an easy vehicle of spreading droplets, choirs should not be organized to assist in our liturgical prayer, through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. A pianist/organist and a cantor wearing masks is perfectly acceptable.
5. Pastors and Administrators are to ensure that the Nave of the Church is populated at no more than 50% of capacity. This may mean that Pastors of large parishes may need to offer additional Masses or additional areas for Mass or both. This is in effect through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020.
6. All C.D.C. guidelines for personal hygiene are to be followed (hand washing and sanitizing). Facial coverings (masks) are to be worn, through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020.
7. Through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, the Pastor is to urge all of his parishioners, out of love for their clergy and their neighbor, that during these difficult days when COVID 19 continues to infect our people, it is preferable to receive the Eucharist in their hands. We urge this, but gently and with sensitivity. The sacred host should be dropped in the hands of each parishioner (without touch).
8. Those that administer Holy Communion should take every precaution: purifying hands thoroughly before and after offering Holy Communion; wearing a face mask during the Rite of Communion, through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. Clergy should take care that they too are cared for and protected.
9. It will be for the Pastors, with the support of their Deans, to plan for home visitations and care for the sick in a hospital setting, given the serious dangers of this COVID 19. Again, additional instructions will follow as they are needed. Pastors are to be creative during these days, in finding ways to assist their parishioners while maintaining a strict physical distancing of 6 feet.
10. Pastors need to work with their key lay leaders to discuss how physical distancing will be maintained as parishioners come to worship, as they approach the Altar in the Rite of Communion and how they depart the worship space.
11. Pastors and their lay leadership should strategize for every eventuality during these unusual times: seeing a sick person arrive at church; dealing with someone that will not adjust to physical distancing; stopping people in the Narthex when the Nave is “full” (distanced, at fifty percent of capacity), etc.

As we continue to deal with the various points of crisis in our cities and towns (health, hunger, loss of jobs, situational depression, fear and concern, etc.), please be assured that I will offer additional instructions as they are needed. I ask all Pastors to inform your parishioners of the contents of this Decree. The following guidelines are suggested to all Pastors and Administrators:

### **Guidelines for Parishes to Consider for Safe Reopening**

**1 Encourage people who are sick or susceptible to stay at home.** The Dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass is in place through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. People who are sick, or have a fever or cough should be instructed not to attend Mass. Pastors should consider recommending people over 65, those with respiratory illness or heart disease, compromised immune systems, and other especially vulnerable persons and their caregivers to avoid returning to mass at this time. Consider placing reminders of this recommendation in church bulletins and posting conspicuous notices in the church. Perhaps it could be suggested to the elderly who want to attend Mass, that they consider attending a less crowded, weekday morning Mass.

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**2 Prohibit all non-liturgical gatherings in excess of 10 people on church property not related to a liturgy through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020.** This would include discontinuing coffee and donuts, in-person bible studies, choir rehearsal, parish council meetings, and any other in-person meetings or non-liturgical gatherings of more than ten people. The only larger gatherings that would be permitted for the time being would be liturgical (Mass, weddings, funerals, confirmation, baptism, anointing of the sick, confession, and baccalaureate Masses).

**3. Keep nurseries closed.** Nurseries and children's liturgies should be discontinued through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. Consider encouraging people with small children to keep them at home to the extent practicable. This is why I ask every pastor with a capacity to "stream" parish liturgies to do so, so that all staying at home will be able to join the parish community in prayer.

**4. Require physical distancing of households by 6 feet at all liturgies.** Encourage families who live under one roof to sit together, and have six feet separation, between separate households. This will likely require the pastors meeting with the ushers and formulating a plan. Perhaps consider blocking off every other row of pews from front to back. Maybe, as at a wedding, the ushers could seat people, or assist them with seating. Also, if a church blocked-off every other pew, it would help approximate the church being at 50% capacity without having to count heads. Consider having as few altar servers, deacons and others on the altar as necessary, and have them physically distanced as well to the extent practicable.

**5 Have pastors consider the possibility of outdoor mass or overflow Mass.** This seems like the ideal option to choose, if it is possible for the parish. Some parishes have large fields that could accommodate quite a large outdoor Mass with people physically distanced (and bringing their own lawn chairs). This could be beneficial for parishes with very large numbers of parishioners. And, at larger churches, consider an overflow Mass into a gym or family room, either celebrated by another priest or on video with a deacon or EMOHC to bring communion to the faithful in the overflow room at time for communion.

**6. The wearing of facial masks is an essential protection.** All should wear masks when attending holy Mass, through the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. The clergy will put on a mask when the Rite of Communion begins. The parish should endeavor have some masks available for anyone without a mask.

**7. Don't pass a collection basket, and limit things that people touch** Either have a common bowl that people drop their offering in, or have the ushers with the baskets on poles collect the offering. Also, consider for the time being to try and limit common touching of items. Perhaps temporarily remove missals and hymnals, so multiple people won't be handling books or missals. Maybe paper song sheets with the lyrics printed on them could be used instead. Priests, deacons and extraordinary ministers should thoroughly wash their hand before and after distributing communion.

**8. Have ushers physically distance people on entering church, at communion, and at dismissal.** Parishes should come up with a strategy with ushers for seating, communion and dismissal to have people seated and dismissed in turns as to avoid congregating too closely as entering or leaving. At some parishes, you might want to have ushers at the door so people don't have to touch the door to open it to enter or exit Mass.

**9. Cleaning** Be sure the restrooms have plenty of soap, paper towels, and there is hand sanitizer. Have people wipe the high contact areas between Masses. This would likely include door handles, pews, and rails. If cleaning products are made readily available, they could consider asking select parishioner volunteers to help with this wipe down between Masses. And, recommend having a cleaning crew conduct a more thorough cleaning during the week.

**10. Having ushers – greeters at every door, welcoming all with hand sanitizer, before and after holy Mass.**

This Decree is given on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May, the Memorial of Saint Joseph the Worker and on the day when our diocese and our nation is consecrated to Mary, Mother of the Church.

I am yours, in the light and love of the Risen Lord,

+ *David P. Talley*

Most Reverend David P. Talley, M.S.W., J.C.D.  
Bishop of Memphis

*Fr. James Clark*

Very Reverend James Clark, J.C.L.  
Judicial Vicar and Chancellor



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