



DIOCESE  
of  
TYLER

March 17, 2020

My Dear Faithful of the Diocese of Tyler,

I pray that you and all who are dear to you are greatly blessed during this Lenten season as we walk with Our Lord in His Passion in unprecedented ways.

I find it to be providential that we find ourselves facing challenges that we never would have imagined only a few weeks ago while, at the same time, journeying through our diocesan Year of the Eucharist and seeking to be a teaching diocese that is more fully steeped in the beautiful truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we approach Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, I ask all of us to spiritually unite our concerns and fears about the coronavirus to Our Lord's journey to his cross. I pray that we can embrace the sacrifices and challenges from a perspective of supernatural faith and deep commitment to Jesus Christ.

Lent is always a time of repentance and renewal of our faith and I hope we can face our current crisis as positively as possible. It seems contrary to our Catholic faith, and the strong spirit of this nation, to separate ourselves from each other; however, let us focus on the reality that what is necessary, at least temporarily, is only physical separation. As your shepherd, I hope to guide all of us toward a greater unity of faith and oneness in the Lord even as we adapt to prudent new concepts like "social distance." The best medical advice that I have been able to obtain indicates that we are in a critical moment where being careful about all human-to-human contact can make an extraordinary difference with regard to how we contain the spread of this virus. Once again, I turn to the beautiful words of Saint John Paul II, "Be not afraid." Let us not give into fear, but instead take up the cross of this challenge and walk the path of the Passion of Our Lord with him.

As Bishop of the Diocese of Tyler, I am also conscious of our important role as a Catholic community. We have the fullness of the truth of Our Lord Jesus Christ and, although in the 33 counties of our diocese we make up a relatively small percentage of the population, we have a great opportunity and a great challenge to serve all of our brothers and sisters in Northeast Texas. I call on every Catholic to embrace the temporary restrictions and inconveniences outlined in the attached decree and to serve as a model for our brothers and sisters as we support all of God's people.

I have made the very difficult decision to temporarily suspend public Holy Masses in the diocese. Your priests will be praying for you as they celebrate daily and Sunday Masses privately. Due to the concerns about the virus and the prudent directives regarding social distancing, I believe this is a necessary step. Please pray with me that these steps will help to minimize the impact of this disease on our communities.

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I ask you to embrace this cross with me as we journey with the Lord to Palm Sunday. The season of Lent, along with the circumstances of this present crisis, provides unique opportunities of penitential sacrifice for all of us. It is heartbreaking and difficult for me to promulgate the decree asking you to join me in this this Eucharistic Fast and I promise you that neither I, nor my brother bishops, would take this step unless it was deemed essential and necessary. I pray that your hunger for the Lord's Real Presence will exponentially grow during this time and that you will share that hunger with others. The Chancery and St. Philip Institute staffs will be working to provide various online spiritual opportunities including videos of Sunday Masses in which you and your families can participate, although spiritually, with other diocesan families.

Finally, we must not let this difficult but temporary interruption to our liturgical life take away the peace and joy that we have as Christians. I invite all to put into action the words of Pope Francis in his *Angelus* remarks last Sunday, "In this situation of pandemic, in which we find ourselves living more or less isolated, we are invited to rediscover and deepen the value of the communion that unites all the members of the Church... united to Christ we are never alone, but we form one single Body, of which he is the Head... it is a union that is nourished with prayer, and also with the spiritual communion in the Eucharist, a practice that is highly recommended when it is not possible to receive the Sacrament."

Let us trust in the Lord and pray for the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph during this crisis.

Faithfully yours in our loving God,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a cross symbol followed by the name 'Joseph E. Strickland' in a cursive script.

✠ Joseph E. Strickland  
Bishop of Tyler



JOSEPH EDWARD STRICKLAND  
BY THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE APOSTOLIC SEE  
BISHOP OF TYLER

## D E C R E E

### **Suspending the Public Celebration of Mass and Enacting Other Measures**

Considering that it is my responsibility to show concern and act with humanity and the charity of Christ toward all those entrusted to my care as Bishop of Tyler (c. 383, §§1, 3), and recognizing my duty to direct, promote, and guard the liturgical life of the diocese (c. 835, §1); and

Having consulted medical experts and heeding the guidance of the civil authorities and public health professionals regarding the critical need to limit gatherings to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus disease, including the guidelines issued by the President of the United States in this time of national emergency;

Therefore, in virtue of my ordinary, proper, and immediate authority as diocesan bishop, I hereby decree as follows:

1. The **suspension of all public Masses** in the Diocese of Tyler. Accordingly, this includes a dispensation for all the faithful in the diocese from the obligation to participate at Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation (cc. 87, §1; 1247).
2. The celebration of **Holy Mass by the priest privately (without the people) should continue** and include, if possible, the assistance of only one other adult minister who is asymptomatic (cc. 904; 906). Previously scheduled intentions, including the weekly Mass for the people, may be fulfilled in this manner.
3. The faithful are encouraged to keep the Lord's day holy and celebrate Sunday as a domestic church by taking time to pray together as a household (c. 1248, §2). Diocesan media will have resources for daily Mass readings, spiritual communion, and other devotions.
4. **Baptisms** may still be celebrated, but with the requirement to keep attendance to asymptomatic immediate family and godparents.
5. The **sacrament of penance** should still be offered, but penance services are to be canceled. When celebrated individually, proper social distancing should be observed as much as possible. Consideration should be given to moving the penitent approximately six feet from the confessor, even if this would necessitate using a different room than is normally used for confession or celebrating the sacrament in a more open location.

6. Visits to the sick may still take place and **anointing of the sick** should still be celebrated by priests for those who are seriously ill or in danger of death, but always following the recommended protocols for handwashing and use of masks by those infected and those who are ministering. Priests are reminded that they may use an instrument (e.g. a cotton swab) to anoint if there is a grave reason (c. 1000, §2).
7. Public **weddings** should be rescheduled, particularly those in April. Simple weddings may be celebrated, but only with the minister, official witnesses, and asymptomatic immediate family members.
8. **Funerals** may be celebrated, but only with the minister and immediate family members. Pastors may use discretion on requests from families to include others.
9. **Public celebrations** of the Liturgy of the Hours, Stations of the Cross, and other devotional gatherings are suspended until the public celebration of Mass resumes. Churches may remain open for private prayer, provided due regard is given to the proper sanitization and hygiene procedures.

I order that this decree be made known to all concerned and communicated to the faithful by the pastors of the diocese.

These measures take effect March 18, 2020 and will remain in force until further notice, with an update to be provided on April 1. Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Give at Tyler, at the Diocesan Curia, on March 17, 2020, the Memorial of St. Patrick.



✠ Joseph E. Strickland  
Bishop of Tyler



Peyton Low  
Chancellor

