

Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord
March 25, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Four weeks ago today, Lent began with the celebration of Ash Wednesday and its cherished invitation to rend our hearts and return to the Lord. We embraced this holy season of penance, sacrifice and conversion, hoping and praying that as Lent annually carries us to Holy Week and Easter, our lives of faith would be renewed and reflect a bit more clearly the life and love of Jesus. On Ash Wednesday, none of us could have imagined the depth of sacrifice that the current health crisis would demand of us.

On March 16, 2020, I suspended the celebration of all public Masses in the eleven counties of the Diocese of Scranton. While so many of you expressed how heartbroken you were with this decision, you embraced it willingly in a spirit of faith and self-sacrifice in order that the Church could do its part in mitigating the spread of the coronavirus.

Today, sadly, we are called to sacrifice even further for the sake of serving one another in our battle against this dreaded disease. The cherished Liturgies of Holy Week and Easter – Palm Sunday, the Mass of the Lord's Supper followed by Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the Celebration of the Lord's Passion, the Great Vigil of Easter and Easter Sunday Masses – will all be celebrated privately, without all of you, the blessed faithful who make up the Diocese of Scranton – filling our churches as you have always done during these most sacred days. The Chrism Mass will be deferred to a later date when the current health crisis has passed.

While this ongoing pandemic is calling us to be socially distant from one another, it does not mean we need to be spiritually distant. I invite you and your family to join me in prayer as we renew our efforts to turn to the Lord. While not open to the public, all of our Holy Week liturgies at the Cathedral of Saint Peter in Scranton will be broadcast on CTV: Catholic Television and live-streamed on the Diocese of Scranton's website and social media platforms. Many parishes will also plan to broadcast their own Masses.

As we seek to come to terms with this latest casualty of the coronavirus, I want to share with you a recent encouraging directive of the Holy See regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation, firmly rooted in the traditions of our Church. With the increasing difficulty for individuals to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation due to the current health crisis, the faithful are reminded that by having perfect contrition, one can receive the forgiveness of sins apart from going to confession. Perfect contrition requires the following three things: a love of God above all else; a sincere desire for the forgiveness from sin; and the resolution to go to confession as soon as possible when this health crisis subsides. Please take consolation in knowing that while you may not have access to the

Sacrament of Reconciliation, the power and love of God is far greater than we can imagine. For all who sincerely express contrition, your sins are forgiven.

My friends, in so many respects, it seems that the disciplines of Lent will last a bit longer this year as we continue to sacrifice, to pray and to serve in unimaginable ways. Yet, through God's grace, I hope that we can begin to see one of the blessings of this difficult moment in our lives. In the midst of this crisis, so many of you are responding generously and courageously to the Gospel invitation to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, sacrificing our own well-being and serving selflessly the lives that God places in our own.

As we confront the uncertainty of our future, may we recognize that our greatest hope has always been rooted in our embrace of the mystery of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection – the heart of our faith as Christians. Good Friday, with its suffering and pain, always yields to power of Easter and its promise of life and peace! So too will this moment in our lives.

May God continue to bless you and your family and keep you safe.

Saint Joseph, pray for us!

Faithfully yours in Christ,

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