



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 in to 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 for penitential sacrifice for all of us. It is heartbreaking and difficult for me to promulgate the decree asking you to join me in 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