

Directives issued by Bishop Checchio in response to COVID-19

March 16, 2020

Our Lord is with us through this all. As the coronavirus pandemic evolves, we must remember that Our Lord sacrificed Himself for us, and He does not abandon us in our need.

Lent reminds us of this and draws us closer to Him through our own sacrificial practices. We did not know what sacrifices this Lent would bring as we began Lent this year. We pray that the joys of Easter will likewise be heightened for us too!

The Catholic faithful of the Diocese — priests, religious and lay faithful — are advised to keep informed and updated regarding the progress of the coronavirus pandemic during this global, national and state emergency. We will continue to monitor the situation and continue to communicate with you. As the situation evolves, more resources and updates will continue to be posted on our diocesan website: diometuchen.org/coronavirus; and on our diocesan social media pages: [@diocesemetuchen](https://www.facebook.com/dioocesemetuchen).

I continue to ask that you avoid crowded areas, maintain good hygiene practices, keep appropriate distances outside the home and if feeling sick, stay at home. I ask that all the faithful remember the elderly and other persons at risk in their families and communities, and reach out to them by phone to see if help is needed.

Out of concern for the safety and health of our local community, I have asked that the following directives be implemented no later than March 18, 2020:

Temporary Suspension of Public Masses

All public Masses throughout the Diocese of Metuchen will be temporarily suspended beginning no later than March 18 and resume no earlier than April 3, 2020, when the situation will be re-evaluated as circumstances unfold. Priests should advise the faithful of this change at their Masses on March 17 as we celebrate St. Patrick's Day Masses and invoke his assistance. Despite the suspension of public Masses, a private Mass will be celebrated daily at 7 a.m. in the Cathedral of Saint Francis of Assisi and can be viewed at that time on their website: www.stfranciscathedral.org. Televised or online celebrations of the Mass and other religious programming are available for use of the faithful on several television channels.

If possible, priests are encouraged to livestream their Masses online. If one chooses to do so, please contact the Office of Communications so that this might be communicated to the entire diocese. The Office of Communications may be reached at (732) 529-7936 or communications@diometuchen.org.

Since the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life, all priests of the Diocese of Metuchen must celebrate Mass privately for the good of all the Christian faithful entrusted to their care and for all people during this critical time. Priests should celebrate this private Mass even if another priest or deacon cannot be with them to assist. Priests are reminded of the obligation to offer Mass for the intentions of those who have made an offering for the Mass. Weekday and other Masses can still be celebrated to fulfill intentions but, the faithful should not be present.

Remember the words of Jesus to the Twelve as they were tossed on the waves of an uncertain sea, “It is I. Do not be afraid” (John 6:20). The Lord is faithful and always calls on us to trust. With such a situation, we are called to more prayer, as are all of the faithful.

Adoration and Private Prayer

Churches should remain open for prayer, private devotion and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Pastors are asked to consider Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament for a period of time during the day. Praying in large groups, however, should be avoided. In all situations, participants should be encouraged to observe social distancing practices, recommending 3-6 feet of space between participants, for any event inside church spaces.

Temporary Suspension of Penance Services

The Sacrament of Penance should remain available according to need, but public Penance Services are not to be conducted. Priests are to take reasonable precautions between the penitent and confessor.

Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals

The celebration of baptisms, funerals and weddings may continue at the discretion of the local pastor. Every effort should be made to follow the guidance regarding appropriate crowd size as suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and mandated by the State of New Jersey. Priests should always remain attentive to the pastoral needs of their people, including those celebrating marriage, those grieving or those in immediate danger of death, who should be baptized without delay.

Anointing of the Sick

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick should remain available for true emergencies. If a priest is called to a hospital, nursing home, or other healthcare institution, he must follow their protective protocols accordingly, especially concerning masks, garments, gloves, and or eye wear. Priests who are called to

the personal homes of the sick must take appropriate precautions as necessary, such as wearing latex gloves.

- A priest may use a cotton-tipped swab or cotton ball as an instrument to anoint the sick person (cf. can. 1000 §2). The priest dips the cotton swab in the Oil for the Sick. After the celebration of the sacrament, the cotton must be burned or buried.
- Should a parish run low on Oil for the Sick blessed by the Bishop, please contact the Office of Worship at (732) 562-2435.
- If the priest uses latex gloves to directly administer the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, the gloves must be burned or buried after the anointing.

First Penance, First Holy Communion and Confirmation

Since the celebration of First Penance, First Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Confirmation draws large crowds, these sacraments will be temporarily postponed in the Diocese of Metuchen until after Easter and will be re-scheduled after that time.

Temporary Closure of Catholic Schools and Religious Education Programs

All Catholic schools in the Diocese of Metuchen will remain closed as mandated by the State of New Jersey. Our principals and faculty members have prepared extensive plans for remote learning.

All religious education programs are suspended with at-home work provided by the local parish leaders where possible.

Parish Offices

A pastor may decide to alter or limit his parish office staff during this time, however the faithful will still have needs that may need to be addressed right away, so parishioners should easily be able to reach the Pastor. The Church is not "closed," even though Masses are suspended, classes being taught remotely, etc. Other regular parish activities and previously scheduled events should be postponed or canceled at the Pastor's discretion. Meetings, social and prayer

gatherings should follow the guidelines of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and mandates by the State of New Jersey, and if not needed, should not be cancelled.

Continuation of Catholic Social and Charitable Outreach

Catholic social and charitable outreach programs and services in the Diocese of Metuchen should continue, but be adjusted as needed to meet directions mandated by the State of New Jersey.

Holy Week and Sacred Triduum

Any decisions in regard to the celebration of Holy Week, the Chrism Mass and the Sacred Triduum will be made as we monitor the situation. Pastors and parishes will be notified in due time.

Call to Prayer

Since we cannot face this alone, we are entrusting this whole situation to our Blessed Mother, under her title of Our Lady of Guadalupe through her Son, to whom our diocese was recently consecrated, and encourage you to join us in praying this prayer:

Our Lady of Guadalupe, mother of God
and of the people of Metuchen:
you always shine on our path
as a sign of salvation and hope.
We rely on you, Health of the Sick,
you who, at the cross, united with Jesus' pain,
keeping steadfast your faith.
You, Salvation of God's people,
you know what we need
and we are sure that you will provide for us,
as at Cana of Galilee,
after the adversity of these days,
may joy and celebration return.

Help us, Mother of Divine Love,
to conform to the will of the Father
and to do what we are told by Jesus,
who has taken our suffering upon Himself
and has burdened Himself with our sorrows
to lead us through the cross, to the joy of resurrection. Amen.
Under your protection, Holy Mother of God,
Our Lady of Guadalupe, we seek refuge,
hear our prayer and intercede for us to the Father
so that we may be free from every danger,
Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for us.

Please note that this is a fluid situation. We do not know how long the restrictions imposed on New Jersey residents will be in effect. Please be patient and look for regular updates from the Diocese of Metuchen. For the latest up-to-date information and resources, please visit diometuchen.org/coronavirus.