



Diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith

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March 17, 2020
Feast of St. Patrick

To the Catholic Faithful of the Diocese of Mackenzie-Fort Smith

I am writing to you after having consulted with the Bishops of Alberta, our own Vicar-General, Fr. Joe Daley, priests of the diocese and with the most current advice of the department of the Chief Medical Officer of the Northwest Territories.

We are in unprecedented times as the effects of the coronavirus continue to manifest themselves around the globe and in our own country. While still untouched here at home, it is now apparent that the province of Alberta, our closest neighbour to the south, is experiencing the first presumed cases of community transmitted infection of the virus. In response, this coming weekend the bishops of Alberta will announce the cancellation of all public masses in the province until further notice. Though seemingly extreme, it is in accord with the current advice from Alberta Health, to limit gatherings in excess of 50 people when those groups include elders and people with compromised health. Our own department of Health and Social Services is in the process of also amending the upward limit of public gatherings from 250 to 50.

In solidarity with our brothers and sisters affected by the virus and in accordance with directives of the NWT Department of Health and Social Service **I am suspending the celebration of all Sunday Eucharistic Services in the diocese immediately and dispensing all members of the Catholic faithful from their Sunday obligation until further notice.**

The doors of our churches will remain open at the regular times on Sundays for those who would like to come and pray privately. In parishes and missions which offer weekday services I encourage those to continue provided they do not exceed the 50-person limit. This may change subject to future developments.

Funeral masses will still be celebrated as needed though there will be no public receptions permitted after the funeral. We will celebrate weddings that are already scheduled but will not formally book any new weddings until we have a clear sense that the pandemic is behind us. The Sacrament of Reconciliation will be made available by appointment with your pastor.

No doubt many questions will arise from this directive. For one, the status of our Holy Week celebrations remains unsure at the moment. We will be sending out more information about Holy Week liturgies as the time draws closer. I ask for your patience as we walk forward together through this difficult terrain. We do so in solidarity with so many people around the world who are going through the same thing and many in much worse situations.

I will be in communication with your pastors so that we can answer your questions with as much knowledge and reassurance as possible.

Bishop Jon Hansen, C.Ss.R.