



Office of the Bishop

Roman Catholic Diocese of Lubbock

April 2, 2020

On Tuesday the Governor of Texas issued an executive order with which we are to comply in carrying out what he defined as our “essential services” as Church. As people of faith, we must give witness to others and go beyond mere compliance with the stipulations of the order. That witness is founded on love of God and neighbor, which demands of us certain social responsibility.

The safety measures asked of us must be taken seriously as acts of charity. This is not the time for fulfillment of selfish wants or desires. All of our decisions at this time must take into account the Common Good.

On Wednesday afternoon most of the Bishops of Texas participated in a conference call to discuss the Governor’s order and its impact on our decisions regarding the administration of Sacraments. As you are probably aware, the Governor explicitly defined church activities as “essential services,” and that has been upheld by the state Attorney General. But we are still under orders to carry out such services in keeping with the national guidelines set forth by the federal government – specifically, we cannot gather more than ten people together, and the “social distance” of at least six feet of separation between persons must be maintained.

In keeping with those guidelines, there is a consensus among the Bishops of Texas that the practice of only private Masses be continued, hopefully livestreamed, with only needed liturgical ministers and video technicians present, never to exceed a total of 10 persons (counting the priest).

Due to the danger of contagion, Holy Communion cannot be distributed to persons not within the church building. Most of the Bishops are also not allowing palms to be distributed as a safety precaution – we will not be distributing palms in the Diocese of Lubbock because doing so carries the danger of contagion.

The sensitive issue of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation was also discussed on the conference call. A “best practice” emerged from the discussion regarding Confession which I am instructing be implemented in the Diocese of Lubbock. Given the situation of pervasive fear and serious illness, any member of the Faithful in serious need of making a Confession can contact a priest to make an appointment to have their Confession heard. The Sacrament must be celebrated either outside or in a large well-ventilated space, with “social distancing” scrupulously observed.

The use of some kind of barrier between the penitent and confessor may be given consideration. We simply cannot, however, maintain publicly scheduled times for Confessions because that would equate to gathering a group that would violate “Stay at Home” and “Shelter in Place” orders. I am asking our good priests, who have made so many concessions and adaptations on behalf of our Faithful, to now make themselves available in this manner to penitents who are experiencing grave necessity for Confession.

Let me also restate that priests will make themselves available to celebrate the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and either themselves or through a delegate make provision for Viaticum to those in danger of death. When a priest or minister of Viaticum is called to the bedside of a seriously ill person, they must abide by the precautionary measures and stipulations of the sick person's health care provider. Health care personnel are the people best prepared to direct precautions to be taken. Their expertise needs to be respected.

Finally, as we enter into the special days of Holy Week, many people have private pious devotions entailing visits to churches. I am leaving it at the discretion of the Pastors of the various parishes in the Diocese of Lubbock to make provision for the church to remain open during normal opening hours.

In cases where the church will be left open, a sign needs to be posted reminding people of the requirement of "social distancing," that no more than ten people are to be present in the church at any one time, and make provisions for sanitation procedures to be carried out.

Let me conclude that this is no time for panic. Let us remember the treasury of the Church's Sacraments and sacramentals. And let us also be reminded of the Church's traditional provisions for indulgences and perfect contrition should the Sacraments not be available due to dire circumstances; specifics of such provisions are available on the diocesan website.

Let us also be reminded that in times of persecution, pandemic, and extreme public need, as believers we rely upon God's merciful grace, who knows our heart, and would not abandon a person of genuine good will in extreme distress.

Prayers for a blessed, albeit unique, Holy Week.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Robert M. Coerver". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Robert M. Coerver
Bishop of Lubbock