

Memo from: Bishop Mark
To: All Clergy
Date: April 1, 2020
Re: Closure of Churches and Discontinuation of Services

Today, state health officials today announced 962 new COVID-19 cases as the statewide total jumped to almost 6,000. Pennsylvania's death toll climbed to 74 after 11 new deaths were reported.

Pennsylvania Health Secretary, Dr. Rachel Levine, said "The continued rise in cases combined with our increasing deaths from COVID-19 reflects the seriousness of this situation."

Given the rising numbers, Governor Wolf has placed all of Pennsylvania under a stay-at-home order. This means that everyone should remain at home and not go out unless it is necessary.

Two weeks ago, in response to an increase of COVID-19 cases in our area, I directed that churches in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown would be open only between the hours of 7 am to 7 pm. Given the continued increase in cases and keeping in mind the safety and well-being of parishioners, clergy and staff, the following directives are now to be observed:

- Beginning with the closure of churches at 7 pm this evening, they are to remain closed, that is completely locked at all times. All churches will remain closed until further notice.
- All pastoral activities outdoors on parish property or in other locations are not permitted until further notice. Any such activities previously planned must be cancelled.
- Outdoor services, such as Masses, prayer services, or confessions are not permitted on parish property and are not to occur at any other locations, with due regard for funerals.
- Parishes are not to have any celebration, blessing, or distribution of palms, and are not to have any other blessings traditionally celebrated in anticipation of Easter, including for example, blessing of food baskets.
- Funeral services may be celebrated in accord with the limits on attendance, after consultation with the funeral director, keeping in mind the opportunity for Memorial Masses at a later date.
- Clergy should contact those who have weddings scheduled during the coming months. In order to assist them, they are encouraged to have the wedding celebrated in church with just a small group (10 or less). In such cases, it is not likely that they will be having a wedding reception, since most venues will be closed. In the future, they could schedule a "reception" and could come to the church to renew their vows according to the rite provided for in the Marriage Ritual for anniversaries.

These directives are made in the interest of the health and safety, of all persons. They are necessary and appropriate to minimize social interaction and the further spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Everyone is encouraged to view televised Masses and other services of Holy Week on local television and cable networks, as well as those being live-streamed on the Internet and social media. Please check dioceseaj.org for updated information.

I invite everyone to support each other with calls, messages, and your prayers. United in our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we will all get through this together.