

LETTER TO THE DIOCESE OF BATON ROUGE IN THIS TIME OF PANDEMIC
READ TO THE PARISHIONERS OF THE DIOCESE AT ALL MASSES
JANUARY 16/17, 2021
SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

This past week Governor Edwards invited the private sector and all communities of faith to help minimize the surge and spread of the coronavirus in Louisiana. As Bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge, I believe that our Catholic family needs to continue to do our part in this effort to minimize the spread of this dangerous disease for the common good.

I first want to commend you and your pastor for following our guidelines during this pandemic by wearing masks and keeping your distance. Your cooperation has proven that our procedures have been successful, few, if any, have been infected from attending Mass (where our procedures have been followed) and there have been no super-spreader events (as far as I know) originating from our liturgical celebrations. The way we attend Mass now is far from ideal but not unprecedented in Church history. Christians of the first century celebrated the Eucharist in underground catacombs fearing for their lives. I am proud of how we have worked to protect one another, especially the most vulnerable members of our parishes.

Yet, despite these efforts, the virus is surging and, if you are like me, you feel that it is all around you, with friends and family being infected, some even dying from the disease. In the past few weeks several of our priests have been infected and others have been exposed directly sending our priest into quarantine for two weeks and unavailable for sacramental ministry. I believe that the present surge of the virus demands that now, more than ever, we need to follow all the recommended practices in order to diminish not only its spread but, more importantly, to lower the number of DEATHS that have resulted from COVID-19.

I have asked our priests, for the next two months, to continue implementing our Diocesan safety guidelines. *These include, but are not limited to, wearing masks and observing physical distancing at all times and at all Church liturgical and social events.* I have also asked that our priests personally avoid social events where masks are not worn to protect their health, so they are available to their parishioners to celebrate the Sacraments and provide needed pastoral care.

Also, vaccines are now being made available to various groups throughout the United States. I have reviewed these remedies along with the Bishops of the United States and we have determined, reinforced by the Holy Father Pope Francis that receiving the new Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are justifiable and morally acceptable ways to help end this pandemic. Being vaccinated should be considered as an act of charity toward others in our communities. I encourage all of the faithful of the Diocese of Baton Rouge to take this moral evaluation to heart as you make your decision to receive the Corona Virus vaccinations as they become available.

I am keenly aware of the considerable physical, emotional and financial toll the virus is taking on us all and that we are tired of the restrictions required for reducing the spread of the virus. So many of us looked to the New Year with expectations that there would be less contagion and fewer deaths. But such has not been the case, and in truth, instead of relaxing our guard we must re-enforce it, and we must continue to practice those things that minimize exposure and spread.

I know that some see masks, physical distancing and other guidelines as a restraint to religious freedom, the intrusion of government into the Church or that I, as your Bishop, am working more as an administrator than a pastor. I will share with you that as I created our present Diocesan Pandemic Guidelines and even write this letter I have only the command of the Lord, "Love One Another" on my heart. All the restrictions and rules we have in place as a Church are simply imposed to stop the spread of this virus that has the potential to kill. I know these guidelines demand that we make personal sacrifices, but real love demands sacrifice. We as Catholics should know this truth of love very well because each time we come to Church we look at the Crucifix, reminding us that it was Christ's sacrifice that saved us. Let us redouble our efforts as an act of Love for our neighbor, yes even a sacrificial love, and together pray that all of us may live through this danger together because we took care of one another.

Know that my prayers are with all you. May our *Hope in the Lord* give us the patience and endurance to come through this pandemic stronger in our faith and deeper in compassion and love for our neighbor.

+Michael Gerard Duca
Bishop of Baton Rouge