

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC
ARCHDIOCESE OF ATLANTA



Dear Friends in Christ,

Knowing how much Catholics everywhere are yearning to return to the Eucharist and to gather once again in our churches, we must communicate that, having struggled with our decision, we believe that we must yet maintain the current practice of sheltering in place. With input and support from the priests of both the Archdiocese of Atlanta and the Diocese of Savannah, we are, for the safety of all Georgia residents, not authorizing the return to congregating at churches or making our churches available for devotions. This determination extends through the month of May. If the sheltering-in-place and social distancing guidelines are altered significantly during this time, we will reexamine the possibility of congregating at churches.

We took many factors into account in coming to this conclusion. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation has been updating data daily and providing guidance on when next steps might be safe. Their current report on Georgia indicates that waiting until June to shift social distancing strategies would be the best course of action.

Many of our priests fall into the high-risk category for this virus, as do a good number of the faithful. In addition to that, priests are reluctant to put their congregations at risk. With more than 200 churches and more than one million Catholics in the state of Georgia, in a great variety of circumstances, we are not able to offer a workable strategy that could apply throughout our diverse population.

If one church offers a unique liturgy or devotion, it might be flooded with attendees. Normally that would be a welcome response, but in the current environment this would not respect the need to remain, for safety's sake, in place. The same is true for drive-through services and devotions. Parishes that could accommodate a drive-through service or reconciliation for their own members would not be able to safely accommodate the additional people from surrounding communities.

We will take the time from now until we do resume regular liturgies and sacraments to carefully plot the conditions--including matters of numerical management, required spacing, and sanitation--under which churches may safely return to offering regular gatherings. The dispensation from Saturday or Sunday Mass attendance is, of course, still applicable, although Catholics are expected to avail themselves of the virtual Mass each week.

Preserving the bonds of parish life is particularly important, even as we see evidence of the strengthening of family worship and devotion in our homes. Parishes are reaching out to the elderly and homebound, which we heartily endorse. Providing encouragement, especially in light of the protracted absence from normal activities, is a proper work of mercy.

Parish catechetical activities such as Parish Schools of Religion or other faith formation opportunities should be offered digitally. Both Arch/Diocesan staff and Parish staff have put together resources for both catechetical leaders and families to use, and they are updating their website resource pages almost daily.

The employees of the Chanceries will continue their working remotely and parishes are strongly encouraged to do likewise.

This is an unprecedented time in history, and we hardly imagined a time when we would have to weigh our Church's spiritual progress against the brute necessities of general health and survival. But, we live in the reality of Easter, and even now we rejoice in the goodness of God and the saving grace of the Risen Lord. May the ever-new and ever-wondrous Paraclete, the Spirit of all truth, sustain us in hope and keep us united in the confession of our Catholic belief.

Archbishop Gregory Hartmayer, OFM, Conv.

Bishop of Savannah/Archbishop-designate of Atlanta

Bishop Joel M. Konzen, S.M.

Diocesan Administrator

Bishop Bernard Shlesinger, III

Auxiliary Bishop