



May 7, 2020

Dear Clergy, Religious and Lay Faithful of the Archdiocese of Toronto,

I pray that you have been filled with the joy of the Easter season, despite the trials we are all living through during this time of pandemic.

### **The Fundamental Importance of Sacramental Life for Christians**

In 1998, in his great apostolic letter, *Dies Domini*, on the importance of Sunday, Saint John Paul II described the sacrifices the Christians of the Roman Empire made to participate in the Sunday Eucharist: “When, during the persecution of Diocletian, their assemblies were banned with the greatest severity, many were courageous enough to defy the imperial decree and accepted death rather than miss the Sunday Eucharist.

This was the case of the martyrs of Abitina, in Proconsular Africa, who replied to their accusers, ‘Without fear of any kind we have celebrated the Lord’s Supper, because it cannot be missed; that is our law;’ ‘We cannot live without the Lord’s Supper.’” (*Dies Domini*, 46) That is the authentic voice of Christian faith: we should think of it both when we consider the number of Catholics with easy access to the Sunday Eucharist who have not bothered to attend, and also the number of Catholics who are barred from the Eucharist in our own days because of persecution, which is more common now than in the time of Diocletian.

### **The Restriction of Sacramental Life**

Throughout history governments, like that of Diocletian, have restricted the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, or have attempted to interfere with the sacraments (as in current attacks on the Seal of Confession). It is our clear duty to resist such unjust government action.

It is also true, however, that in extreme medical emergencies, such as a pandemic, government officials – specifically health officials - legitimately fulfil their duty of responsibility for the common good by issuing reasonable instructions to the whole populace, based upon well-founded medical principles regarding the best way to combat pestilence. One immensely painful spiritual side-effect of such instructions is that Christians are temporarily not able to come together to receive the sacraments. With the virus rampaging through the community, the most fundamental instruction from the health authorities is: *Stay at home*. That is why our churches are temporarily closed.

Because most people are following these restrictions, despite the great sacrifice which they entail – including for Catholics the enormous sacrifice of being deprived of access to the celebration of the Eucharist - it appears that Ontario is making progress in reducing the number of new cases. But we are by no means clear of this plague; in particular, we still see a large number of cases in long-term care facilities, an especially painful reality since it prevents loved ones from being physically present to parents, grandparents or relatives, even in their final hours.



## **Temporary Restriction of Sacramental Life in the Light of the Gospel**

While it makes sense for all citizens to follow the reasonable restrictions that have been imposed to contain the virus, for Christians doing so is also a matter of faith, charity, and justice. After all, these are some of the stars we steer by:

- 1) “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Yes, we are responsible for others. In justice, as well as charity, we have no right recklessly to endanger others, or to cause their death.
- 2) “Thou shalt not kill.”
- 3) “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

Over the centuries the Church, following the commandment of Jesus to love our neighbour, has cancelled the public celebration of Mass in time of pestilence. Our ancestors may not have had as thorough an understanding as we do now of how epidemics spread, but they did know that in such a situation when people gather for any reason, even religious, they can spread infection and harm their neighbour.

We should also recall that we Christians defend the sanctity of human life from the first moment of conception until natural death: in a time of pestilence, that commitment of ours requires us to follow the reasonable norms designed to protect the lives of those around us.

Of course, the Mass itself is not cancelled. Every day I celebrate Mass for the people, as do all the priests throughout the Archdiocese of Toronto. Several bishops and priests are also livestreaming the Mass which they celebrate. In a certain sense, this is a modern effort to do what Saint Charles Borromeo did in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when he invited people to look from their windows at the Mass being celebrated in the street below. Livestreaming is a kind of technological window into the Church, although it obviously is no substitute for actually participating personally in the Mass. It does, however, do spiritual good, as we eagerly await the resumption of the public celebration of the Eucharist.

## **Towards A Resumption of Our Full Sacramental Life**

We expect that there will continue to be restrictions on large gatherings in the days ahead, until it is safe to resume them. There will likely be a “phased” approach, a gradual return to public celebration of the sacraments. Even then, our new reality in church may be different from what we were accustomed to in the past, with some continuing precautions, since we want to resume public gatherings in a way that does not lead to a re-igniting of the pandemic.

As our province begins to consider how and when activities can commence once more, the Catholic Church is preparing for the time when we are able to re-open our churches. The Archdiocese of Toronto has established a number of working groups to determine how we will proceed. We want to ensure that everyone can worship in a safe environment. We are looking at best practices in other places, working with medical experts and consulting to determine what to do in the days ahead, recognizing the geographical and physical diversity of our more than 200 parishes.

As with the martyrs of Abitina in the days of the Roman Empire, for the many hundreds of thousands of Catholics who in normal times participate in the Sunday Eucharist each week, and for the many thousands who participate in daily Mass, or spend time in adoration, the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, are fundamental to our lives. We need to resume



public worship, as soon as it can safely be done, and according to a plan co-ordinated with the public health authorities.

Meanwhile, the Church is increasing its life of prayer. Both the real prospect of death and the reality of enforced solitude may bring many graces, if we approach the pandemic restrictions in the right way, illuminated by our Easter faith. Our task is to find creative ways to perform the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and to enter more deeply into prayer. We must make fruitful use of this solitude to deepen our faith, and to contemplate what the prospect of death reveals to us of the superficiality of the dominant secularism which is our social environment. Through our experience of this period of tribulation we can come to appreciate more fully the profound richness of our life in Christ.

May God abundantly bless all of you, so that together we may come through this time of tribulation, with deeper faith, hope, and love.

Sincerely in Christ,

*† Thomas Card. Collins*

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