



Diocese of Belleville
Office of the Apostolic Administrator

May 13, 2020

Our Lady of Fatima

The Fiftieth Anniversary of My Ordination to the Priesthood.

Dear Priests and Deacons of the Diocese of Belleville,
Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

.Peace be with you!

On this day in Eastertide, when I recall the overcast skies when John Cardinal Cody ordained me a priest forever at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois, I am happy to share with you a very positive development. **In consultation with Governor Jay Pritzker and Illinois health officials, the Bishops of the Province of Chicago believe we can initiate the beginning of the gradual return to an active liturgical life in our parishes.** I know how anxious you and the people you serve have been, during these weeks of sheltering in place, to return to the sanctuaries of our churches for the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist and the other sacraments, which are a source of the spiritual strength we all need in the face of suffering, anxiety, and death caused by the novel coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease it causes.

I know that the Christian Faithful in the Diocese of Belleville have very mixed feelings about the directives of federal and state government officials asking all of us to follow very strict precautions to safeguard our health and the health of our family members in the face of the ongoing pandemic that has transformed many aspect of our daily lives in a matter of weeks. I know that some wonder how the Bishops of Illinois can even plan for the reopening of our churches while the 7-day rolling average of new cases in the state is more than 2,400 per day and more than 13% of people who are tested in our state prove to be newly infected.

Others of you feel that since the number of coronavirus cases in the southern part of the state has been much lower than the very high numbers in the Chicago area, there may not have been a need for our parishes to follow such strict precautions that deprived us of our Holy Week and Easter celebrations and disrupted the schedule of our confirmations, weddings, funerals, graduations and other important parish events. Others have written to me indicating that, as people of faith, we should have greater trust in God and confidently assemble for Mass trusting that Jesus Himself will protect us from harm. But we must always remember that God has given us the great gifts of intelligence and reason and He expects us to use these gifts to make wise and prudent decisions. As your Bishop, it has been my responsibility to ask you to do everything possible to follow faithfully the best available disease-mitigation practices to contain the pandemic's rampage through our communities.

The Bishops of Illinois are today presenting a Plan for gradual reopening our churches and returning to our liturgical life that we know is imperfect. I am sure you will understand that this Plan will necessarily unfold in stages or phases. It will be influenced by what healthcare professionals tell us about the movement of the invisible virus. The situation remains fluid and potentially dangerous. For the present, I ask the priests to continue to livestream the celebration of the Eucharist and other prayer experiences, while the necessary preparations for the Plan are put into place.

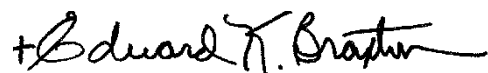
We expect the current situation may continue for several weeks, while we await updates on testing and the effectiveness of “social distancing.” Our Plan for reopening our Churches for public worship must include every precaution to ensure public gatherings do not create a second wave of contagion, thereby undoing the gains we have made by adhering to the directives developed by experts in infectious diseases.

The Bishops have reached an agreement with the Governor on a multi-phase Plan for reopening our churches for the celebration of the sacraments, private prayer, adoration and Mass. **Attached you will find an Executive Summary and the details of the full Plan.** Please study this document carefully and begin to implement preparations for Phase I immediately. The instructions contained in the Plan take precedence over any other recommendations, including the Thomistic Institute. I am aware that the Plan is somewhat detailed, and I realize that some parishes will find it challenging to follow every detail. I can only ask you to make every effort to follow the Plan. In the end, you can only do what is possible. It is for the Pastor and his co-workers in ministry to make prudent judgments, even when there are parts of the Plan that you may find difficult to do. Nevertheless, it is imperative for all parishes to avoid departing from these directives. Our Office of Worship will assist to the extent that it can.

Please note that in Phase I, we will begin with 10 people gathering for sacraments and adoration. This does **NOT** include the celebration of Sunday or weekday Masses. That will only begin after the parishioners are confident that they know how to manage social distancing and church cleansing in a pastoral and effective manner. Once the celebration of Sunday Eucharists begins, the Bishops have decided to keep the current dispensation in place AND, out of necessity, permit the faithful to fulfil their obligation at a weekday Mass. I realize that every parish may not be able to move through these Phases at the same pace. It may be particularly challenging to determine which 10 parishioners can participate, to select a sign-up method to assist in contact tracing. (Everyone is not online.) I am very sensitive to the fact that the health conditions of some priests make them very vulnerable. Though they may wish to follow the Plan in their parishes, it may be unwise for them to do so without consulting their physicians. Our priests and deacons must go forward doing all they can to safeguard their health and the health of their parishioners.

On the day of my Ordination, the Cardinal anointed my hands with Sacred Chrism, thereby blessing my insignificant hands for the work of nurturing the Church at the altar and on the streets. Like all of you, I long for the day when we can all fold our hands in prayer in the House of the Lord. Our Lady of Fatima, Pray for us! *Oremus pro invicem.*

Prayerfully and appreciatively yours in Christ,



The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Apostolic Administrator
Diocese of Belleville

P.S. This letter and the Executive Summary of the Plan should be posted to your Parish Websites and shared with all the parishioners in every way possible. Send these documents to your Parish Pastoral Council members, your Trustees, your Parish Liturgy Committee, your ushers and greeters, and others. Make every effort to communicate this to ALL of your people in a pastorally sensitive way. I have asked the Vicars Forane to try to arrange conference call meetings with Pastors in his Vicariate. Encourage everyone to observe carefully this Plan, while being creative and sensitive in providing the Christian Faithful safe and faith-filled experiences of the Church's life of prayer.