

## A Pastoral Letter from the Bishop of the Diocese of Fond du Lac

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are now in the early days of an unprecedented disruption of life as we face the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic. As with the rest of society, churches are trying to help stem the spread of the virus. By now I expect you know that we have suspended gathering for in-person worship including on Sundays until further notice. We have similarly ceased all in-person meetings that are not absolutely essential. This is hard. And it will get harder in lots of ways. One of those is that we will not be celebrating Easter with one another in person. We will have to find other ways to celebrate. But we are faced with choosing between worshiping together person and love of our neighbor by maintaining social distance. Indeed, I see this as an act of the neighbor-love to which Jesus calls us. It is an act of considered compassion to try to prevent others from being infected, particularly those most vulnerable due to age or existing health issues.



There is much that remains unknown about the virus and how long we will be dealing with the outbreak. What we do know is that it is highly contagious with the potential to be very bad. What we also know is that slowing down the spread is our best bet to not overwhelm the health system with too many cases all at once. That also will allow more time for hospitals to prepare to treat the more serious cases. Many of us are going to contract the virus sooner or later. For most of us it will be no worse than a bad case of the flu. For others it will be very serious or even life-threatening. You may have heard the term "flattening the curve". Here is something Fr. Chris Arnold of Trinity, Oshkosh and chair of our Covid-19 Task Force has written to explain that:

If you pay \$12000 a year in rent, you'd prefer to pay \$1000 a month instead of having your landlord demand \$12000 all at once! That's because your rent would keep pace with your income, and the demand for rent would hopefully always be lower than the supply of money. You don't want a big bill to hit you all at once and put you in debt. Likewise, we have a limited amount of medical resources: hospital beds, ventilators, and staff to help us. We don't want to have more sick people than there are beds for them. It is to help flatten the curve that we have taken the extraordinary steps we have taken.

For the time being we have suspended our usual church activities. But that does not mean church is cancelled. We, all of us, remain the church, the body of Christ. And we are working and planning to find ways to be the church in this strange time. Among other things each congregation will be finding ways to stay connected. We are practicing physical social distancing, but we will find ways to be personally and socially connected by other means. I expect things will get harder before they get better. We will need one another for support and encouragement.

Please know that suspending regular public worship and most in-person meetings, etc. doesn't mean your priest and lay leaders now have nothing to do. Rather, they are working longer and harder to figure out how to do worship, pastoral care, faith formation, etc. remotely. Pray for them. And offer to help.

I would be remiss as bishop not to point out that suspending worship does not mean that our obligation to financially support the mission and ministry of the church is suspended. If you have made a pledge to your congregation, I urge you to continue honoring that by mailing your offering to the church. If you did not make a pledge but are accustomed to giving something, I urge you to also send your financial offering to the church.

To help us make our way through this and continue to be faithful as the body of Christ I have formed Covid-19 Task Force made up of clergy and healthcare professionals to advise me. I am also forming sub-groups to focus on providing ideas and resources for Pastoral Care, Prayer & Worship, and Christian Formation to our congregations. I will be in regular contact with clergy and lay leaders of congregations. And we will do what we can for all members of the diocese informed as things develop or change.

Know that the clergy and each congregation is in my daily prayers. Beginning this Sunday, I will be at Grace, Sheboygan livestreaming worship beginning at 10:15. I also invite you to a Lenten video retreat which I recorded yesterday “Keeping it Together When the World is Coming Apart: Praying with Julian of Norwich. It will be available for viewing beginning at 10:00 a.m. this Saturday, March 21 [by clicking here](#). A booklet to go with the retreat can be found [here](#).

We are entering a sort of wilderness as a church and as a society. But as followers of Jesus, we know that he is with us in the wilderness and trust that he not only walks alongside us, but he will go before us to prepare a way. I encourage you to draw nearer to him in the days to come. The Church and her members have in wilderness times before – persecution, war, famine, plague, etc. We might well wish that we were not facing the particular wilderness before us. But we know that God will not abandon us even as God did not abandon Jesus to the grave. Holy Week and Easter will be different this week. But the reality of Easter remains. The tomb is empty. And therefore, our hope never is.

So, let us roll up our spiritual sleeves and dedicate ourselves to being faithful witnesses to the hope that is in us. Sink your heart into the heart of God through prayer. Practice patience and compassion, even with yourself. Reach out to one another by phone or video or regular mail. Encourage one another. Pray for one another.

If God is for us, who is against us?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31, 37-39)

You are in my prayers. I ask your prayers for me.

Under the Mercy,  
+Matthew Gunter  
VIII Bishop of Fond du Lac