

RE: The reopening of our Church

SMO/SMP Parish Members,

I am pleased to share with all of SMO/SMP the call of Bishop Thomas Zinkula to the reopening of our parish churches for private devotional prayer. On March 16 our Bishop required all public Masses and congregational devotions to be cancelled throughout the Diocese. He did this in the face of the presentation of the COVID 19 pandemic which was bringing forth an overwhelming presentation of critical care illness and an unacceptable rate of death in our state, nation and world. This was quickly followed by a closing of churches to the public on April 6.

National and state directives to shelter in place so as to limit social contact and infection within the populace went into force. These drastic measures enabled a slowing of infection, critical illness and death within the state and nation. This slowing has enabled the provision of medical care to keep better pace with the need for care to address and mitigate an out of control presentation for critical care services.

On April 30 Bishop Zinkula and his brother Bishops of Iowa called for the continuation of the prohibition of public Masses and the closing of churches into the month of May. On May 8th Bishop Zinkula noted: "The bishops of Iowa consulted and decided that, since the spread of the COVID-19 disease remains a real and present danger, it is prudent for now to continue the suspension of public Masses. I would like to share with you some thoughts related to the reopening of our churches and the resumption of public Masses. The process of reopening will be reasonable, responsible and gradual." He went on to say, "When the number of COVID-19 infections, deaths, hospitalizations and percentage of positive tests begin to trend down, we will reopen our churches for private prayer."

As pastor of SMO/SMP I am pleased to share that these COVID 19 markers have decreased such that our parish churches may now be open again for private devotional prayer with the limit of 10 persons presenting in the church at any one time. The churches of SMO/SMP will open on Friday 29 May. Public Masses remain cancelled and these COVID 19 markers remain under observation to note a further decline which will then enable public Masses to again be offered at parish churches.

On May 23 Bishop Zinkula further delineated "the reasonable, responsible and gradual" reopening of churches and the resumption of public Masses at Parish churches as he noted:

"It will occur in three steps. Unfortunately, we likely will have to maintain physical distancing for quite some time. **Throughout this process, all Catholics in the Diocese of Davenport are dispensed from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass.**

Step 1 reopens the churches for private prayer if a process of regular cleaning and disinfection can be maintained. Since the number of new COVID-19 cases, deaths, hospitalizations, and percentage of positive tests has begun to trend down, parishes may open their churches for private prayer, beginning the week of May 25, at the discretion of the pastor.

Everyone must wear face protection. No more than ten people may be in the church at any one time. There is no public celebration of the Mass. The celebration outside of Mass of Baptisms, weddings, and funerals can include up to ten people. Adoration chapels remain closed.

Step 2 resumes public Masses with some restrictions. Now that the churches are reopened, the data from the Iowa Department of Public Health will be monitored, and if it continues to show a downward trend for fourteen days, we will begin to celebrate public Masses once again.

At that time, public worship may take place at the discretion of the pastor if physical distancing, cleaning and disinfecting can be maintained. **Everyone must wear face protection. Those who are at a greater risk of infection due to age and/or health condition should stay home.**

Participants maintain six-foot distancing by sitting in every third pew and horizontally apart from other households. Distancing also should be maintained while gathering, during the Communion procession, and following the Mass. Singing should be omitted.

Public celebration of Exposition and Adoration may take place if limited to thirty minutes, physical distancing is maintained, and face protection is worn. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion are not to visit homes. Pastors will be given the faculty to administer Confirmation.

Step 3 relaxes some of the liturgical restrictions. This will occur when data supports the conclusion that we are between pandemic waves (noting a reduction to low and constant or decreasing numbers for fourteen day periods).

At this time, seating in every other row can occur, and a six-foot distance should be maintained between households horizontally. Cantors may be used but without choirs or hymns. The Gloria, psalm and responses may be sung.

Baptisms, weddings and funerals may be celebrated at Mass. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion who are not at high risk of infection may make home visits to the sick (not COVID-19 patients who have special chaplains assigned to their care).

Once there is 'herd immunity' – probably through the wide availability of a safe and effective vaccine – there will be an initial return to “normal” liturgical practices, with the kind of precautions taken during the flu season."

As the provision of each reasonable, responsible and gradual step requires an observation and verification of a downward trend in the number of new COVID-19 cases, deaths, and hospitalizations no designated date can be presently assigned to our entering into each additional step. On Friday 29 May SMO/SMP will enter into **Step1** and the churches of SMO/SMP will be open for the first time since 6 April.

May God's blessing continue to aid all of us remaining in the grip of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Fr. John