



The  
Episcopal Diocese  
of New York

March 13, 2020

My Brothers and Sisters,

I concluded my message of two days ago by expressing my trust and confidence in all of you, and my belief that each of you is equipped to make the best possible decisions right now to protect your people and the members of your community, while continuing the prayer and sacramental life of the church. I have learned since then that many of you were hoping for more specific direction as to what is permitted. This note will bring clarification to that.

I have also come to see that while I was, in that note, concerned primarily with what it means for the church to be the church during crisis, I failed to understand fully how frightened many of you are, and how frightened the members of your parishes are. The word I seemed to be hearing yesterday from some was “Bishop, we are afraid, and you are not listening.” I apologize for that. I am listening now. In this note, I hope to give you the broadest possible latitude in making your own parish life and worship decisions to help you and your people to live with as much peace as these extraordinary circumstances will allow.

1. I will not issue a broad directive to close the churches of the Diocese of New York or to order the suspension of public worship across the diocese, because our circumstances are just too different across our geography and 200 churches for a blanket policy. However, each of you has my permission, and more than that, *my encouragement*, to close your own parishes for a time, or to cancel in-person public worship, as your local conditions require. It is also acceptable for you to offer communion in one kind only and to suspend the use of the common cup, or to hold a service of Morning Prayer instead of the eucharist. And of course, in all you do, please follow the safety guidelines we offered you last week, and stay safe.
2. If you are able to offer streaming video as an alternative to holding a public gathering, that is acceptable and advisable. In all things, make your safety and the safety of your congregation and community your first concern. Right now, any public gathering of people carries higher risk, and that fact should drive your decisions. We should all be thinking now about how or if we will be able to offer worship during Holy Week and on Easter Day. Our plans should include, if possible, pastoral sensitivity toward those who will want to receive an Easter communion.
3. If you have the capability to offer worship by streaming video, and plan to do so, please let our communication office know today, and provide the access information, so that we may communicate broadly the opportunities for online worship. Remember that most of our churches do not have that ability, and we all have the opportunity to provide help and service to one another.

(continued)

4. Public services at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine are suspended, but a non-public service will be live-streamed this Sunday at 11:00. I will be the preacher. Please do not come to the cathedral, but the video stream may be accessed through the cathedral website ([www.stjohndivine.org](http://www.stjohndivine.org)).
5. At the diocesan offices, we are suspending all non-worship meetings and events, at least through Easter Day, and will re-assess our circumstances after Easter. I commend that same decision to you as you assess your own parish life, with broad latitude to make the decisions to protect yourself and your people. I also expect that as soon as the coming week we may have a temporary closing of the diocesan offices, as the mayor of New York is asking people to work from home and stay off of public transportation. I echo that encouragement for you.
6. Visitations by your bishops are suspended through the remainder of Lent, and again, will be re-assessed after Easter. It has become clear this week that our visits inherently increase the numbers of people in attendance, which is not advised at this time, and we have discovered that continuing to hold confirmations is insensitive at a time when family members with underlying health conditions, or compromised immune systems, will be unable to attend the services.
7. Pastoral care of the vulnerable in your parish, and essential feeding and outreach programs to those in need, are going to be more challenging, even as we anticipate a surge in human need in the coming days and weeks. I am confident that there are safe ways to carry out these ministries, even pastoral care to people with a coronavirus diagnosis, but I understand that for some parishes not everything will be possible in the coming season. This may be a place where neighboring parishes can support each other and share the work that goes into these ministries.
8. With regret, I announce that the Holy Tuesday renewal of ordination vows is cancelled. It is one of my favorite things, and I will profoundly miss seeing all of you. But I will consecrate the chrism for the coming year on Maundy Thursday in the cathedral, and the fresh oils will be available through my office after Easter. Also, it is always my pleasure to make you the gift of a book on Holy Tuesday. Those books have been purchased and are in boxes in my office. After Easter they will be sent to you by mail. Also, I am sorry that we must cancel the Priests Conference. Even though that event is not scheduled until May, registrations and money are required now, and we do not feel confident in going forward with those plans. Perhaps we can plan for us to get together in the fall. A decision regarding the Wardens Conference will be made closer to the date. In the same way we will continue to go forward with plans for the ordination of deacons on May 16. If necessary to make alternate plans, we will assess that as we get closer.

You will notice that this represents some change in my thinking since the letter that I sent to you two days ago. This public health crisis is an evolving situation, and the ways in which we live and minister will necessarily be reactive to those changing circumstances, and I expect that you will be receiving rather frequent communications from me as this continues.

*(continued)*

I must tell you that Margaret and I have both had substantial, sustained exposure to someone who is right now being tested for coronavirus. We feel fine, but if he tests positive, we will need to self-quarantine for awhile. It is likely that all of you have also had more exposure than you know. Please pay attention to your own health, and take care of yourself, and be gentle with yourself, so that you may be safe, and so that you may continue to lead and minister to your people. You are the living stones from which the miracle that is the Diocese of New York is built. I pray for you daily, and never more so than in these extraordinarily challenging days. I long to see you all again, and until then, I remain

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "+ Andy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche  
Bishop of New York