



November 20, 2020

Dear Friends in Christ,

As this difficult year winds to a close and even our celebrations of the upcoming holidays stand to be transformed by the pandemic, we must hold fast to the great gift of hope, already given to us by God at our Baptism. Hope keeps us from discouragement, sustains us in hardship, and reminds us that we were created for eternity and life with Christ. While everything around us seems altered and unfamiliar, our faith and our relationship with the Church does not have to change. Jesus Christ is the same *yesterday, today and forever* (Hebrews 13:8) and we can look to the Sacred Scriptures for continued comfort and for inspiration to sustain and grow in our relationship with Him.

When Jesus saw Zacchaeus perched in a sycamore tree (Luke 19:1-10), He called out: *Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.* Saint Luke records that the man came down from the tree and Jesus received him with joy. Zacchaeus was watching Jesus from a distance and after Jesus' greeting and invitation they dined together with graciousness and hope. Zacchaeus' life was changed forever because of His relationship with Christ.

When public worship was suspended in March, our congregations became in some ways like Zacchaeus, watching the liturgical life of the Church from a distance through technology. Even after reopening, we missed (and still do) our brothers and sisters we are used to seeing in the pews around us, we miss the smiles obscured by a mask, we miss the laughter over coffee and doughnuts in the Narthex. There is a physical separation, like Zacchaeus in the tree.

But no matter how far we may feel from one another or how we mourn for the loss of contact, Jesus has never ceased to call us closer, especially back to the communal and sacramental life and relationship with the Church.

A basic understanding of our Catholic faith is that the Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1324). Through our entrance into the Paschal Mystery, we encounter the living and risen Christ. As Christians, we honor a special day of the week, Sunday, which is to be set apart as sacred and holy. On the Sabbath Day – the Lord's Day – we are called to gather together as a community to hear the Word of God and partake of the sacred meal, the Eucharist, so that our faith can be strengthened and sustained. May we strive to draw ever closer to Him, especially in difficult and challenging times.

**DIOCESE OF SAVANNAH † OFFICE OF THE BISHOP**

2170 E. VICTORY DRIVE, SAVANNAH, GEORGIA 31404 (912) 201-4080 DIOSAV.ORG

Even as we care for our physical and emotional well-being, we must also recognize that our spiritual lives need to be nurtured and tended. Christ is calling out to us, as He did to Zacchaeus, and inviting us to dine with Him. With sensitivity and understanding for our individual and family circumstances, as your Bishop I ask you to reflect on your response to His invitation. If you have not yet returned to the public celebration of Mass, please spend some time in prayer and listen for the voice of Christ who is inviting you to be present for the Eucharistic feast. In the quiet of your heart, mind and soul, consider His invitation to return to the Eucharist – to an encounter with the One who is joy, grace, hope and peace.

Since I was installed as your Bishop two months ago, I have visited many parishes and schools, and conducted Days of Reflection with our dedicated Priests who serve in the 90 counties of our Diocese. During these visits we have discussed the challenges and hopes that have surfaced during this time of pandemic. I am pleased to report that many people are attending Mass and there have been no outbreaks of the Coronavirus linked to our reopening of churches. This is good news which tells me that our precautions and safety protocols are effective. We also join together in prayer asking for wisdom and patience while vaccines and treatments are developed and perfected to assist us in this crisis.

My friends, thank you for your witness of faith and for your dedication to our Church.

I ask you to please review the attached information regarding the Dispensation from the Sunday Mass Obligation, as well as updated guidelines and recommendations for our parishes. Let us go forward in faith, hope and wonder, as Zacchaeus did, always ready to welcome Our Lord.

Please know that I pray for you, your loved ones and your intentions. I ask you to pray for me as I begin my Episcopal ministry here in the Diocese of Savannah. Although we may not see one another each day, we can meet each day in our prayers. May we *Rejoice in the Lord always!*

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Stephen D. Parkes". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Most Rev. Stephen D. Parkes, D.D.  
Bishop of Savannah

## UPDATE REGARDING COVID-19

### DISPENSATION FROM SUNDAY MASS ATTENDANCE

Though technology has assisted us in maintaining a sense of community in our parishes, it does not replace the ability to gather for the celebration of the Eucharist. We have been created by God for community, and many have suffered tremendously from isolation and loneliness during these months. Technology is an effective tool for evangelization, but we must not grow complacent when it comes to our physical presence at the Eucharistic celebration.



DIOCESE OF SAVANNAH

### UPDATE REGARDING COVID-19

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As society reopens, mindful of social distancing and other precautions, I make an appeal to you: that you perform an examination of conscience in regards to your everyday activities and consider Mass attendance in that context. If you and your household are frequenting restaurants, your children are attending school, family members are involved in sports, and individuals are attending social gatherings, I believe that Sunday Mass attendance should also resume. Sunday Mass may only be missed with good reason related to personal and communal health as the pandemic continues.

A dispensation from the obligation of attending Sunday Mass was granted for the faithful of the Diocese of Savannah in March, and was most recently extended until November 22, 2020.

Beginning with the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2020, the dispensation from Sunday Mass attendance is granted only for the following:

- those who belong to vulnerable populations due to age or health
- caregivers and those who live with those in vulnerable populations
- those who are sick or have symptoms
- those who suffer from extreme uneasiness or anxiety from being in any public places in this time of pandemic

While we must not forget that we are still living in a time of pandemic, as a Church we are to be guided with a desire to move forward with hope, confident in God's help. We are called to promote a culture of hope, not a culture of fear.

In order to move forward with utmost care and confidence, I present the following guidelines for the parishes of the Diocese of Savannah. I hope we can move forward in a uniform manner throughout our diocese so that all will find in our parishes a welcoming and safe environment that encourages a sacred and reverential atmosphere.

### GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ALL PARISHES

- State and local guidelines and ordinances must be followed.
- Parishes must place in a visible and somewhat prominent location near the entrance to buildings the following text: *Under Georgia law, there is no liability for an injury or death of an individual entering these premises if such injury or death results from the inherent risks of contracting COVID-19. You are assuming this risk by entering these premises.* (Please note that in accordance with the Georgia

**PARISH GUIDELINES  
FOR COVID-19**

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COVID-19 Pandemic Business Safety Act, the text must be printed in at least one-inch Arial font and placed apart from other text.)

- Worship spaces and schools must be properly cleaned and sanitized, with particular attention given to bathrooms and surfaces that are touched most often, like door knobs and doors. Parishes may utilize disinfectant smoke machines and be attentive to wiping down surfaces.
- Hand sanitizer must be readily available at the entrance of every building, near the areas where communion is distributed, and near the altar.
- The use of masks has been shown to significantly decrease the rate of contagion of COVID-19. Wearing a mask is highly encouraged at all times when the faithful are inside our buildings.
- Worship spaces may be filled to their maximum capacity according to social distancing norms. Ushers must assist the sitting of the faithful to maximize space and to ensure proper social distancing. Families/households who wish to sit together may do so.
- Music and singing should be provided for the Sunday liturgy in all parishes, including Mass parts.
- Hymnals are not to be placed in the pews. One-time use liturgical aides may be used, or hymnals may be made available for purchase.
- Altar servers may assist at the altar during Mass, as long as parents agree and the servers wear masks. Parishes may start by assigning a maximum of three altar servers (a cross bearer and two candle bearers) to perform limited functions.
- Lectors, ushers, and Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion may resume their ministerial responsibilities as needed.
- The Sign of Peace may now be extended to the faithful without physical contact. This may be done by saying: *Let us offer one another a simple acknowledgment of peace* or by explaining to the faithful beforehand that the Sign of Peace will be exchanged without physical contact. Families/households may still exchange the Sign of Peace as before. The rubrics of the Roman Missal should be followed.
- The distribution of the Precious Blood to the faithful remains suspended.
- In order to maintain the integrity of the liturgy, the distribution of Communion must occur at the indicated time and not after the final blessing.
- Holy Communion cannot be denied to the faithful who wish to receive it on the tongue. Please remind the faithful how to properly receive communion in the hand and on the tongue in order to avoid physical contact.
- Faith Formation for Children and Adults must continue using ingenuity and creativity. Even if the number of faithful involved in faith formation is decreased, every parish must continue to provide opportunities for learning and especially for the preparation of the Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.
- The Sacrament of Reconciliation must be celebrated in a room with ample space that allows for social distancing and air circulation. 'Drive By' confessions are not permitted.