



Diocese of Belleville
Office of the Bishop

May 6, 2020
Easter Weekday

Dear Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, Religious, Diocesan and Agency Staffs:

May the Peace of Jesus Christ be with you!

You remain in my thoughts and daily prayers as you continue to find creative ways to exercise your vital ministry during this unique time of fear and uncertainty in our country and in the Church. Your faithful service is surely a source of renewed hope for the Christian Faithful.

Yesterday, the Bishops of the Province of Chicago had a conference call meeting. One of our topics was the need for us to begin to develop guidelines for the gradual return to the celebration of liturgies in our churches. As the leaders of the largest community of faith in the state, we are preparing suggestions for Governor Jay Pritzker, indicating how we might return to our churches in phases, once the medical experts conclude that it is safe to do so. Obviously, this is a difficult and complex decision. We are aware that we cannot propose anything that does not have the health and safety of our people as the highest priority. However, we are hopeful that the Governor might be open to a flexible number of people gathering in our churches based on the seating capacity of each church.

Even with the uncertainty of a particular date or time or even how many people will be able to attend celebrations when churches do reopen, Pastors and members of the parish staff need to begin thinking about plans for the return to our churches so that when the time comes, they will be ready to respond. Obviously, it will not be possible to simply fling open the doors when we are allowed to gather again. Most likely, there will be a gradual reopening of churches similar to the gradual reopening of businesses. Safe distancing will need to be maintained. Masks may need to be worn. Churches will have to be disinfected. Fewer people will be able to attend. This may be a cumbersome process requiring sign up lists for Sunday Eucharist, and volunteers to thoroughly cleanse the churches after each gathering.

Patience will be required by all!

I am sending you a copy of “A Synopsis of Pastoral Considerations for the Reopening of Churches and the Resumption of Public Masses,” created by the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions. I would ask each of you and your Parish Liturgy Team and Parish Pastoral Council to read this document carefully. It will surely help you to begin thinking about the specific adjustments and changes that may be needed for us to once again celebrate the Sunday Eucharist, the Liturgy of Christian Burial, nuptial Masses and other liturgies in our Churches. Below is a link to a resource from the Thomistic Institute which you may also find helpful. You should note that these are not specific recommendations from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. But, they may assist you in your preparations.

<https://thomisticinstitute.org/covid-sacraments>

It is possible that this gradual transition back to our churches could begin in June depending, in part, on the number of infections and deaths in the State of Illinois due to the Covid-19 disease. One of the concerns we should all have is how can we return to larger gatherings when we have not developed an effective method of widespread testing for the coronavirus and contact tracing. Some of our people and some of us might be fearful of assembling in large numbers if these important protocols have not been addressed.

I will keep you informed of future developments as soon as I know them.

Prayerfully yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward K. Braxton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

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