

A Message to the People of God about the Coronavirus Epidemic From Archbishop Cordileone

We are living in extraordinary times, unprecedented in the lives of most of us. Six Bay Area counties (San Francisco, Marin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Alameda and Contra Costa) are now under a “shelter in place” order for the purpose of containing the spread of the coronavirus. It is of the utmost importance that we all do our part to comply with this order, so that we might “flatten the curve,” that is, extend the period of time in which people will get sick, so that our health care institutions will not be overwhelmed. Otherwise, some people will inevitably not get the health care they need and, in all likelihood, some of these will end up dying. Even those who are willing to risk their own health in not complying with this order must realize that they may be endangering the health, and even lives, of others, since it is possible for one to have the virus for days, and perhaps even weeks, before the symptoms manifest themselves. Hence, one could be infecting others without even realizing it.

Extraordinary times require extraordinary measures. I have recently sent a memo to our priests, outlining the measures we will take to comply with what the counties are asking us to do, while at the same time continuing to provide for the spiritual care of our people. These decisions were arrived at only after I engaged in extensive conversation with pastors, experts in the field, and some of our lay faithful, and then held an emergency conference call consultation with the deans of the ten deaneries of our Archdiocese as well as Archdiocesan leadership.

The Celebration of Mass

1. Pastors (or a priest they designate) will celebrate Mass every day in their parish churches with only one altar server in attendance. Due to the “stay at home” order, no one else can be present in the church during the celebration of Mass, only the priest and one altar server. This means that for the time being, and until further notice, there will be no public celebration of Mass.

2. That does not mean, though, that our people cannot attend Mass *remotely*, and so parishes that have the technology to do so will livestream these Masses celebrated in private. This will allow our pastors to continue to communicate with their parishioners from the pulpit in real time. Information on livestreamed parish Masses can be found here: <https://sfarch.org/livestreams>.

3. Continuing the celebration of Mass in our parish churches in this way (i.e., in private, with no one present other than the priest and one altar server) will also enable our parishes to fulfill Mass intentions that have been requested by the faithful. Where there is no requested intention for the Mass, our priests have been asked to celebrate Masses for the intention of those suffering from the coronavirus, for the health care workers attending to them, and for researchers seeking a cure and vaccine for the virus.

4. Since the celebration of Mass in public is not available, the faithful are not bound by the obligation of Sunday Mass attendance. To be more precise: to “keep the Lord’s Day holy” is the precept of the third Commandment of the Decalogue, direct from God, to which we are always bound and can never be dispensed; however, at this time, ***our people are excused from keeping the Lord’s Day holy by attending Sunday Mass***. This means that our people must keep the Lord’s Day holy in other ways, at home.

Other Considerations

6. To the extent possible, churches will remain open during the day so that our people may have the solace of prayer in a sacred space, especially before the Blessed Sacrament, during this distressing time.

7. Priests will continue to visit the sick, and celebrate the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick for them, in accordance with special sanitary measures I have indicated to them.

8. In parishes where posted hours for regularly hearing confessions in the parish church might possibly draw even a small crowd of people together, confessions will have to be scheduled by appointment. Parishes in this situation have been asked to communicate this announcement widely and thoroughly. To be in keeping with the safety practices being urged upon us, I have also asked our priests to hear confessions in an open space, or spacious room, where the six-foot distance rule can be observed and confidentiality respected.

9. Weddings and funerals should be postponed to the extent possible. Parents presenting their children for baptism should arrange with their pastor how best to accommodate the celebration of this life-giving sacrament.

10. Sadly, Palm Sunday falls within the timeframe covered by the “shelter in place” order. It will, moreover, severely impact our celebration of the Triduum liturgies. Communication to the pastors will be forthcoming to give them guidance on how to carry out these ceremonies.

The unavailability of public Mass at this time truly saddens all of us. I would encourage us, though, to take this as an opportunity to be creative in finding ways to keep holy the Sabbath at home. For ideas on how to do this, please see the resource, “Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy at Home.”