

An Update and Word of Encouragement from Bishop Love **(5th Sunday in Lent – March 29, 2020)**

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There is an old adage (adapted from a line in *“To a Mouse”* by Robert Burns) which states, “The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” It seems the more we try to plan and adjust to our current situation with the coronavirus, the more monkey wrenches keep getting thrown in, causing us to have to plan again.

Unfortunately, as the coronavirus continues on with no clear end in sight, it has become necessary to make several changes and adjustments to upcoming scheduled events at the parish and diocesan level. The first of which has to do with Holy Week and Easter. As I had shared with you earlier when we temporarily suspended all public Church services in cooperation with the governmental restriction on the size of group gatherings in an effort to curb the spread of the coronavirus, I had hoped that we might be able to resume services in time for Holy Week and Easter. With the number of coronavirus cases continuing to grow and the peak not expected for several more weeks, the current suspension will need to remain in place at least through the middle of April and perhaps longer. We will reevaluate the situation on April 15th and every week thereafter until it is safe once again to return to our Church buildings.

Recognizing how important the celebration of Easter is to all of us, I encourage each of our parishes to plan a glorious Easter celebration for the first or second Sunday after we are able to resume public services in our Church buildings. While the Church has created a liturgical calendar to ensure an orderly way of worshipping God, remembering and celebrating the life and holy acts of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is important to remember that Jesus is the Lord of time. He is not controlled or restricted by the calendar. In Hebrews we read, *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8)*. Given our current situation, I believe it would be very appropriate for us to celebrate the glorious resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, of His passing from death to new life, as we ourselves pass from this time of separation from one another to the time we can be joyfully reunited with one another in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

In the meantime however, during this time of suspended public services, I encourage us all to take advantage of the many livestream and recorded online Church services that are available. Many of our clergy and lay leaders are providing wonderful live-stream and online worship services in the form of Morning and Evening Prayer, Holy Eucharist, The Litany, The Stations of the Cross, Bible Studies, and a variety of other services. I even heard of one parish that organized an online Coffee Hour where parishioners were able to visit together via the internet. These different services can be found on the various parish websites, all of which can be accessed through the diocesan website: www.albanyepiscopaldiocese.org

The Diocese of Albany website has a great deal to offer as well, not the least of which is the weekly online Sunday Holy Communion Service. My wife Karen and I were just able to worship together this morning at home, complements of the Communion Service on the diocesan

website. I must say it was a bit strange sitting in the “congregation” with my wife, watching myself lead the service on the computer screen. Fr. Derik Roy gave an outstanding sermon, as did Fr. Paul Hartt last week. I highly commend these services to you. An online Palm Sunday and Easter Service will be provided, helping to fill in the gap until we can be reunited in our parish churches for a more glorious Easter celebration.

While very supportive of all the livestream and online services being offered, I would discourage any plans for parking lot services or curbside drive-by communions where people are encouraged to drive up and receive Holy Communion while in the car. I appreciate the intent and desire to make Communion accessible during this time when we are unable to meet in our church buildings, however, it goes against the government and health officials attempts to limit exposure and keep people home during the coronavirus outbreak.

Looking now at other diocesan events that have been impacted by the coronavirus and the resulting group gathering restrictions, the following ministry events are being postponed to a future date, yet to be determined: the Women’s Welcome Home Initiative (WHI); and the Men’s Cursillo Weekend. All special or regularly scheduled diocesan committee meetings to include Standing Committee, Trustees, Episcopal Charities and Diocesan Council, etc. will be held via Zoom meetings or conference calls until further notice.

A similar arrangement is being made by the National Church for my upcoming Title IV Hearing Panel proceedings which had been scheduled for Tuesday, April 21st in Albany. The Hearing Panel / Trial will not take place in person at the Desmond Hotel as originally planned, but will now be a virtual meeting online. People will still be able to observe the proceeding on line, but will not be allowed to participate directly. At the moment, it is not clear whether it will still happen on April 21st, or whether a new date will be set. I will let everyone know when I know.

This past Friday, the Standing Committee voted unanimously to postpone the annual Diocesan Convention until the Fall. A new Call to Convention will be issued by the Secretary of the Diocese once the date and location have been set. A new deadline will be set for turning in nomination forms and other information related to the Convention. All the nomination forms that have already been turned in, as well as the parish registration forms identifying parish deputies will be held on file and do not need to be redone. This year’s convention, unfortunately will need to be scaled down considerably. We will deal with all the official business that needs to be covered, but unfortunately we will not be able to hold workshops, plenary sessions, the youth rally and other special features that have been such an important part of our Diocesan Convention for the past 20+ years. This has not been an easy decision, but given our current circumstances, we are not able to hold Convention as normal this year. By God’s grace, next year we hope to return to our regular Diocesan Convention format.

The status of this year’s Beaver Cross Summer Youth Program is still up in the air. It is our sincere hope and prayer that Beaver Cross will take place as scheduled this summer. A final decision will be made by May 15th. It all depends on what is happening with the coronavirus at that time.

There is no question that the coronavirus has wreaked havoc in all aspects of our lives – our personal and family lives; our work; our finances; our health (for many); our parish and diocesan lives; our local communities, state, nation, and indeed the entire world are all being severely impacted. No one is left unaffected. In many ways, the coronavirus and all the various responses to it have turned our lives upside down.

As we are all experiencing, this can be a very unsettling and often frightening time, and yet the Lord doesn't want us to live in fear. As the Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans: *"For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the Children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption...And by him we cry 'Abba, Father,' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."* (Romans 8:14-16). My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, God loves you. He has not forgotten nor abandoned us. He is with us. The very last recorded words of our Lord Jesus Christ right before He ascended into Heaven after His death and resurrection was, *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20). His Holy Spirit lives and dwells within us.

Jesus never promised that we wouldn't go through difficult and trying times. He never promised that we wouldn't experience suffering, sorrow and loss. What He did promise is that as we go through those times, times such as now with the coronavirus, He would be with us and help us through it. I don't know all that God is going to do in and through the coronavirus, but I do know that we can trust Him. In Christ is our hope.

I would like to close with a prayer written by Bishop Ken "Fanta" Clarke, our dear friend from Northern Ireland:

Unshakeable God, at this time of national crisis and personal pain, we look to you for help and hope. We don't understand what is happening. We are fearful and apprehensive. We grieve to see people dying. We are anxious about the future. We are fearful about surviving financially. We are really just about hanging in. We can't get a grip about what is going on. It hurts to see people suffer. It hurts to see doctors, nurses, and care workers stretched to their limits. It is so painful to think of those in isolation who are deeply worried. It is heartbreaking to see those who are bereaved. It is distressing to know that some people are utterly alone. We cry out to you for help and hope. We ask your forgiveness for our pride and folly. We repent of our selfishness and sin. Show us your mercy Lord. Heal our land. God of compassion, stretch out your hands of healing. God of grace, show us your mercy. God of truth, may your Word bring hope. Lord Jesus, walk with us in our pain, fear, and confusion. Once again calm the storm. Once again heal the hurting. Once again bring hope and help. Bless all who are serving selflessly to care for others. Give our leaders wisdom and vision. Help them to make the right decisions at this unprecedented time. Strengthen and protect all who are still working. Thank you for the thoughtful actions of many people. Thank you for all whose lives are marked by acts of kindness. Thank you for churches seeking first your Kingdom, a Kingdom that cannot be shaken. Thank you that in you, the unshakeable God, there is rock solid hope for the present and future. Thank you that you are the God of the Cross

and the God of the resurrection. Breathe afresh your Holy Spirit upon us, upon our nation, and across the world at this time. In the powerful Name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Faithfully Your Brother in Christ,

+Bill

Bishop of Albany

P.S. Just a reminder, that while our church buildings are temporarily closed, the Church – the People of God, the Body of Christ, You and Me still have work to do. I invite and encourage each of us to think and pray about what we can do, individually and corporately, (even with all the restrictions placed upon us) during this time of the coronavirus pandemic, to serve as a channel of God's love and mercy and healing grace. Who has the Lord put on your heart to reach out to through a phone call or letter? Who might you help get groceries? What have you been wanting to do for the Lord, if you only had the time? Perhaps, NOW is that time. God Bless!