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**To: The Faithful of the Diocese of London**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Last Friday, the Government of Ontario communicated the news of the latest lockdown. The “stay-at-home” order was included so that we would avoid as much travel as possible, with as little movement as possible outside our homes. This order was put in place to stop the spread of the coronavirus and its variants, to keep people safe and to protect lives. The variants are mutating rapidly and having a greater impact on young people, leading many more people to contracting some form of the virus and ending up in our hospitals, which are filling to capacity – and in some cases beyond capacity.

Following the announcement of the lockdown, I issued directives that were in line with restrictions that had been previously released, to respect the requirements of the Government while carrying on the best we can in our parishes. The directives were issued with the best intention of keeping people safe and stopping the spread of the virus. We acted out of charity and true concern for our neighbours, knowing these changes would require sacrifices from all of us.

Many who contacted me pointed out that two of these directives were particularly difficult: the closure of our churches and the deferral of Baptisms. I was asked: How is it that Baptisms could be deferred, but funerals and weddings allowed to proceed? If the Government allows ten people at a religious service, why can we not have Masses for the number allowed?

Many parents were concerned since their child’s Baptism had been deferred, then rescheduled, only to be deferred again. This became a hardship for some who would wish to go ahead with the celebration of Baptism, while others would choose not to venture forth with a newborn at this time. This desire for Baptism cannot be, however, a matter of fear that an unbaptized child would be separated from God in eternal life. That way of thinking puts limits on God’s grace that no human can determine.

With concern for the parents who have waited patiently for Baptism and who would really like the opportunity to celebrate it with their child, **I hereby grant that pastors are allowed to use their discretion to celebrate the sacrament of Baptism in our parishes even during the present “stay-at-home” order.** It is still preferable to defer Baptisms in the spirit of the order and to help prevent further spread, but I also wish these parents to have peace of mind and joy through the Baptism of their child. All the requirements of capacity, distancing, and those aspects outlined in our protocols for the celebration of Baptism during the pandemic must be followed.

Some people asked why we could not have Sunday and weekday Masses, pointing out that we are allowing a funeral Mass for ten people or less. In the last lockdown, it was a great hardship, we know, for those families who could not have a funeral Mass for their loved ones. It was bad enough when a family member died, but then to miss the rituals of the Church added to the pain of loss. When we could open for Masses with ten people, at least some solace was available with very small funerals.

We considered the possibility of allowing Sunday and weekday Masses with ten people, but it became clear that the majority of parishioners would not be accommodated even by a rotation that would last months. To be as fair as possible and knowing that God’s grace is not limited to the sacraments, the Episcopal Council, which advises me and stays connected with the deaneries of the Diocese, recommended that we not open when only nine or fewer people could attend Sunday or weekday Masses. Funerals and weddings could proceed, but all other Masses would be offered only by the priest and the minimal number of people necessary for the liturgy. Since there is no way enough Masses could be celebrated to accommodate everyone, it is best that the churches remain closed. To fill the void, many parishes offer livestreamed or recorded Masses, and other Masses are available online.

I am aware most people cannot fulfill their Sunday obligation under these circumstances. For that reason, I granted the dispensation that is in effect until the end of Easter Season this year (23 May). Likely, it will need to be extended again.

Some people asked why our churches are not open for private prayer at this time. While the Government allows it, in the spirit of the “stay-at-home” order and the need to do everything we can to stop the spread of the virus, I decided not to open our churches. This we did in the first lockdown and in January. The members of the Episcopal Council believe it is important to continue in that vein. The question here is: what is essential for our faith? It is essential that we pray and have a relationship with God, but not that we pray in a church. This has been for many a wonderful time to rediscover the idea of the “domestic Church”; that is, that our homes are places of prayer where God dwells. Jesus promised that he would be with us always. He is truly present in the Eucharist and the Blessed Sacrament in our tabernacles, but he is also present in each one of us and in our homes. Let us not forget this important “presence” in our midst.

Finally, a word to those who wrote or called. I thank you for your heartfelt thoughts. I am particularly buoyed up by all of you who told me that you are praying for the Diocese and me. In so many, I saw that your motive was based in charity and genuine concern. For all of that I am truly grateful.

As we manage the way forward in this new reality, it is our charity and concern for others that will win the day. As I said in an Update just before Christmas, “Charity means we must make these sacrifices to help ensure our neighbours are safe. We must care for others in our communities and our fellow parishioners, even if it means we cannot gather for a short time. These measures will further restrict participation in the sacraments and call forth sacrifices from the faithful across the Diocese who have been drawing spiritual nourishment from the sacraments. The severity of the pandemic, however, means we must do our part, out of love, to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus” (Update #15).

With Bishop Dabrowski, I assure you of our prayers. May the Blessed Mother, the Immaculate Conception, and St. Joseph, her most chaste spouse, pray for us!

Sincerely yours in Christ,  
Most Rev. Ronald P. Fabbro, CSB  
Bishop of London