



May 23, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I wish to let you know of an important breakthrough in our state that will allow for greater worship opportunities for all Minnesotans as we together address the Covid-19 pandemic. On Tuesday, Governor Walz will issue a new executive order that allows faith communities to accommodate up to 250 people for worship services, provided precautions are taken to protect public health. We welcome that development. We know that Governor Walz and his administration are trusting that when faith communities gather, they will do so consistent with public health guidance. Our commitment as Catholics to the common good makes it natural for us to pledge to be good citizens when we gather for worship.

As you know, the Catholic bishops of Minnesota believe that the previous limitation on faith-based gatherings to ten people unreasonably burdened the Church's ability to fully meet the sacramental needs of our faithful. Because of our Catholic beliefs about the centrality of the Eucharist to our lives, we were prepared to move ahead and allow larger Masses even without support from public officials. As allowances were made for other, less essential activities, it seemed to many that the life of faith was receiving unequal treatment. The new executive order removes that unreasonable burden on the Church and allows us to bring the Eucharist, the food of everlasting life, to our community.

Before I go further to talk about what this means for our parishes and community, please allow me to express my gratitude to Governor Walz, Lieutenant Governor Flanagan, Commissioner Malcolm, Commissioner Harrington and the other members of the governor's team. I am so thankful for the honest, open, and fast-paced dialogue we had over these past days and am pleased we could come to a consensus about a reasonable and safe path forward that allows a greater number of people to safely return to worship beginning May 27.

I hope that the discussions have given the governor and his team a better understanding of our duty as bishops to provide sacramentally for the good of our flock, as well as our unwavering Catholic commitment to working for the common good. Pope Francis frequently reminds us that there has to be a connection between what we do within the walls of the church and what we are then impelled to do outside the church in service to our brothers and sisters. With the Eucharist as the source and summit of Christian life, it should not be surprising that the Church jealously guards its jurisdiction over the sacraments and entrusts to each bishop the responsibility to be moderator, promoter and guardian of the Church's liturgical life.

It has been a privilege to collaborate with Rev. Lucas Woodford and his colleagues from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. They have been great partners on this matter and other issues. We are grateful for their friendship and how they help us strengthen our relationship with Lutherans in Minnesota.

I also need to thank Senate Majority Leader Paul Gazelka for bringing faith leaders into conversation with the Walz administration over the past few months.

The bishops of Minnesota are also grateful for the help of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, which provided sound legal counsel in defense of the liberty of the Church to offer the sacraments, especially in our conversations with the Walz Administration. Thank you also to the law firm Sidley Austin for its work on this matter.

The bishops of Minnesota and I are thankful that our conversations with the administration and state health officials have helped us to strengthen our plan for moving forward. We humbly hope, conversely, that our discussions have assisted with the development of state guidance for worship services that is in the wider community's best interest. Governor Walz and the bishops of Minnesota share a common goal – enabling people of faith to safely return to the full practice of their faith. And though it is our prerogative as bishops to oversee when and how the Mass and sacraments are made available, our faith tradition leads us to do so as much as possible in collaboration with legitimate public authority, just as we are doing today.

Although we had previously announced that Mass could begin May 26, the bishops have determined that it would be best to move that back one day – to May 27 – to give each parish the opportunity to reassess its plans in the light of the developments announced today. We have decided to make some small adjustments to our statewide protocols to reflect the helpful guidance that will be issued by the Minnesota Department of Health. In particular, at this time when the number of cases in Minnesota has not yet peaked, we are asking parishes to limit attendance at Mass to 25% of church capacity or 250 people, whichever is lower. Even with these revisions, we hope that parishes already planning to come together on Sunday, May 31, for the celebration of Pentecost and the conclusion of the Easter season, should still be able to do that.

I need to make something clear about the return to Mass. The bishops of Minnesota have repeatedly told our pastors and parishes that they should only return to public Mass when they are able and willing to follow the many protocols that have been put in place – including sanitization and a few changes to the liturgy, particularly regarding the reception of Holy Communion. If a parish is not confident they are ready, they should not open. Period. And if the faithful feel safer at home, the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days continues to be dispensed. Reflecting the current CDC guidance, we also strongly encourage those who are over the age of 65 or who are especially vulnerable to not attend.

Let me express my gratitude to our priests, parish staffs, and parish leadership teams. Our priests have been on the front lines of the pandemic – ministering to the sick in their homes, hospitals, and care facilities. They have placed themselves at risk for the love of their brothers and sisters and found new ways for spreading the Gospel and building community. They are heroes in my book.

Let me express my thanks to the faithful of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. While unable to receive the Eucharist – the very Body and Blood of Jesus – for the past two months, you have creatively and patiently found other ways to live your faith. You have made spiritual communions, stepped up to help those in need, and generously supported your parishes. And for those of you who may not be able or willing to return at this point for the Eucharist – especially those most vulnerable or over age 65 – I thank you for your patience and understanding and promise that your priests will make every effort to provide you with pastoral care. It would be wonderful to see you at a parking lot Mass in the security of your own cars. Otherwise, I hope that you will continue to join with us by participating in the many live streamed Masses that will continue to be offered by our parishes.

Please remember to pray for all those who have died at this challenging time, for those who grieve them, and for those who are sick and their families and caregivers. Also pray for the women and men in the health care field and first responders who daily risk their health to take care of our sisters and brothers in need. Finally, please join me in praying for an end to this pandemic.

And may God bless our country as we prepare to remember this Memorial Day weekend those who fought for it.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Bernard A. Hebda". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Bernard A. Hebda
Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis