

- Nine weeks ago today was the last time we had a public Sunday Mass here in our church. Nine long weeks! It was the third Sunday of Lent, and you'll remember that we had to limit Mass attendance to no more than 100 people.
- It was the following Sunday that we asked you to attend Mass in the parking lot, watching the Masses going on in the window of the Conference Room of the Allen Center and following along on Facebook. And after that, we weren't permitted to have Mass publicly.
- Since that time – which seems like a *really* long time ago – our world has certainly changed. Just in our own parish, people have lost jobs or been furloughed. Weddings, first communions, and confirmation have all been upended.
- And this past week I learned of parishioners suffering from COVID-19.
- While we've done our level best to get the Sacraments to you and provide for your spiritual needs during these long weeks, I know it's not been the same as having Mass together as a parish family. It's not been the same for me, either!
- But now a ray of light has broken in the spiritual darkness of this pandemic.
- As many of you know, a federal judge has placed a restraining order on the restrictions limiting religious services here in North Carolina. This, of course, is a big win for religious freedom in our state.
- The ruling states, "This court does not doubt that the Governor is acting in good faith to lessen the spread of COVID-19 and to protect North Carolinians, but restrictions inexplicably applied to one group and exempted from another do little to further these goals and do much to burden religious freedom."
- To his credit, Governor Cooper is not appealing this decision.
- His office responded by stating: "We don't want indoor meetings to become hot spots for the virus and our health experts continue to warn that large groups sitting together inside for long periods of time are much more likely to cause the spread of COVID-19. While our office disagrees with the decision, we will not appeal, but instead urge houses of worship and their leaders to voluntarily follow public health guidance to keep their members safe."
- This restraining order is temporary, and it will last at least 14 days. After that time, we'll see what happens.
- But in the meantime, the diocese has given us the go-ahead to determine the best solution for our particular circumstances, as long as provisions for social distancing are observed and the pews and other frequently touched surfaces are cleaned between Masses.
- So here we are, at least for now! This week the staff and I will look into how we will celebrate 1st Communion and receive our RCIA candidates into the Church in the next two weeks.
- Of course, even though we are at least temporarily allowed to have public Mass again, we still need to exercise prudence. Our country has learned a lot about COVID-19 in the past two months and how it spreads.
- The governor's office is correct that the virus spreads when people are in close proximity for long periods of time. In other words, you do incur some risk by being here – and you can pose a risk to others.
- That's why I've encouraged you to wear a face mask. Your face mask helps prevent you from spreading the virus to others if you have it and don't know it.

- So naturally, the diocese is asking you to follow the guidance of public health professionals and refrain from attending Mass or any public space if you have been at risk of exposure or are experiencing symptoms of sickness.
- We need to have due regard for ourselves and our neighbor's health and well-being. If you think you could have been exposed to the virus, and certainly if you are sick or vulnerable, then do not come to Mass. It's not a sin to miss Mass during this time of crisis.
- As was the case at the beginning of the pandemic, we're not offering the Sign of Peace. Additionally, you shouldn't hold hands during the *Our Father*, and after Mass the deacons and I will be waving to you rather than shaking your hands.
- For now, the holy water fonts will remain empty, but we have holy water available in the urn in the narthex and in bottles. Pew racks will also remain empty for the time being.
- Regarding Holy Communion, we won't be using the entire Communion rail. Instead, I ask that you come up in two lines and use the portion of the rail closest to the center. You may kneel or stand. The deacons and I will sanitize our fingers between each communicant.
- As for the method of receiving Holy Communion, you may continue to receive the normative way, which is on the tongue, or you may receive in the hand. You may also elect to make a spiritual communion if you're concerned about receiving Holy Communion.
- As this pandemic has drug on, it seems like our fears have turned to frustration as all of us want life to go back to normal. But let's exercise some patience here.
- We've been given a great gift in being able to return to Mass like this, but we still need to be prudent in our interactions with one another. God expects us to exercise due charity by doing what we can to prevent the spread of the virus.
- As I mentioned in my homily 9 Sundays ago, it's important to remember who we are. We are Catholics! We are people called to live in faith, hope, and charity.
- While I certainly don't want to put anyone's health and safety needlessly at risk, and while a very healthy dose of prudence and caution is warranted, let's be reasonable, calm, and trustful of God.
- As Christians redeemed by the Precious Blood of our Lord, we know that our spiritual health is more important than our physical health. That's why I made the decision for us to come back to church for Mass.
- Of course, keep praying during this time. God has allowed this situation for a reason, and the frustration and fear we're experiencing right now can lead us to greater holiness if we have the right frame of mind.
- May God bless us, keep us safe, and continue giving us the strength we need to handle the difficulties we're facing.