



The
Episcopal Diocese
of New York

March 23, 2020

A letter to the clergy of the Episcopal Diocese of New York

My Brothers and Sisters,

This comes to you one week after my earlier letter directing that public services of worship be suspended in the Diocese of New York until May 17. We are learning that that may be a target we are going to need to be flexible about, but it is certain that we are in a situation which is day-to-day changeable, and even over the last week has become more visibly alarming. We are seeing the rapid escalation of infections and the growing number of people who have died of the coronavirus. Those numbers seem to skyrocket every day, and we awoke this morning to be told that five percent of the people infected by this worldwide epidemic are in New York. It is important to remember that we are presented continually with best- and worst-case scenarios, and no one can predict with accuracy the course of this epidemic, but it is certain that we are at the epicenter of a global crisis. In the midst of that uncertainty, and all our fears, the first concern and priority of every clergyperson and every parish in this diocese must be to preserve and shelter human life. Three priests of our diocese, and a growing number of laypersons, have already contracted COVID-19. And the decisions we make now can do much to protect ourselves and our people. I am confident that we can live safely, and take care of one another, and this letter is meant to speak to that in several specific ways.

Last Sunday I preached from the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, and I spoke of this season of our lives in the biblical context of Exile. “How can I sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Coronavirus in America is the strange land. We have been forcibly separated from our churches, our worship, and from one another, and even the comforts of the sacraments and of the community gathered together, which have sustained us through many another hard time are denied to us this time. I am asked so many questions about what we may do, what we can do, what we must do, in a season which changes day to day, and I wrestle as you do with the confusion and fright of such uncertain times. I find myself returning to the psalms again and again, turning to the poetry and language of Exile to help me own the absence, embrace the loneliness, understand the privations. I find myself in contemplation of diaspora (for we are dispersed), that I may find comfort in that ancient eternal hope “Next year in Jerusalem.” So that I may prepare myself and this beautiful miracle which is the church for that restoration which I know will come.

“If I take the wings of the morning, and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there also shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.” Thy hand shall hold me. Ours is a faith grounded in resurrection, and life and light, and on an eternal hope in God. I see all of that and more in you these days. I am so grateful for the quality of the leadership you are bringing to your

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local communities right now, and of the sacrificial and courageous decisions which I know some of you are making. We are being tested in every way we can be, and the witness which I am seeing in all of you brings honor on the priesthood and the diaconate and reveals the glory at the center of our common life. Your parishes are so blessed to have you as their priests and deacons, and so am I. Our epistle reading last Sunday said, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope!”

THE HOLY EUCHARIST

The suspension of public worship is one week old in this diocese, but has already raised serious questions on the part of clergy and laypeople about the spiritual cost of denying the eucharist to the sick and the dying, and to our congregations in the midst of the fear which is in the very air we breathe. The knowledge that it will be months before we can gather again in our churches has heightened the alarm about this. I am listening and paying attention. I hear your pain and I hear the yearning of your people. Tomorrow I will have a Zoom meeting with Bishops Allen and Mary, and we are going to talk about how we may continue to be eucharistically nurtured in our Exile, and how to live in the love of the Eucharist even when it is denied to us. You will hear something more on that subject this week. In the meantime, questions have been raised about alternatives, such as mailing consecrated hosts to people, or providing drive-by communions (or distribution of palms) in the manner of Ashes to Go. These practices are not permitted.

More will be said, but right now we your bishops want you to know that as long as the sacrament of the eucharist is not available to the people of this diocese, neither will we partake of it. We will share with you the loss, the absence, and the longing for the altar, and the psalms and prayers of our separation and exile.

THE EXTRA FINANCIAL BURDEN PLACED ON CHURCHES

We are aware that all or almost all of you are seeing immediately reduced revenues, and it is clear that it will be some time before things will be back to anything that looks like normal. I know that some of you are facing the very hard decisions around employee layoffs or reductions. I am so sorry. We must all expect that this will impose hardship and sacrifice on every parish and on the institution and budget of the diocese. There is little that the diocese can do to relieve this hardship on churches, except in the matter of the Apportioned Share. Some relief from your accustomed Apportioned Share is planned, and after an executive team meeting in the morning (by Zoom) we will have a communication out to all clergy and wardens on that subject.

PASTORAL CARE

In person, face-to-face pastoral care, both of your homebound and elderly parishioners, and of those who will become sick or infirm for all of the usual reasons and now coronavirus too, is impossible. That care, which must be offered by every parish, can only now happen remotely, by Zoom or phone. Please do not endanger yourselves or put your people at risk by your presence.

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FUNERALS

While we can, it is important for us to bury the dead with prayers and our presence. No funeral services are to take place inside the church. Rather, small outdoor graveside services, with one member of the clergy, and only the most immediate members of the family, are recommended. In groups of fewer than ten people, widely spaced and without the embraces which would normally express our love and care and condolence, we may still make commendation for our people as we commit them to the earth.

FOOD PANTRIES

It is very important that as we are able, we continue our feeding ministries. You will have seen that already the number of unemployed is increasing rapidly. They, and the homeless, and the already poor, will continue to need our life-giving ministrations. I am confident we can continue these outreach ministries, with a few precautions. Volunteers must be as few in number as possible, and be spaced safely apart from one another, with regular washing of hands. Food should not be plated and served but packaged for takeout. Clients can be invited to come and take a meal or grocery package themselves and leave the church with them to eat elsewhere.

Please be safe, even as you continue to be caring. And know that even from a distance I love you, and I remain

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "+ Andy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche
Bishop of New York