



# DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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March 10, 2020

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

### **CORONAVIRUS PRECAUTIONS**

As hospitals and public health officials in Montana prepare for the potential spread of the coronavirus COVID-19, it is important to take some precautions within the celebration of Mass in the Diocese.

As many know, this time of year commonly is a peak season for the spread of influenza. According to the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, there have been 8572 cases of influenza reported with 361 hospitalizations and 9 deaths this flu season. This includes confirmed cases in more than half of the regions in the state. Children, the elderly, and those with compromised immune and/or respiratory systems are most at risk. As of the date of this letter, there are no confirmed cases of the coronavirus illness in Montana. However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as local healthcare agencies, are encouraging preparation and precaution as the situation continues to be monitored. As diocesan Bishop, I am responsible for promoting, regulating, and being vigilant over the liturgical life in this diocese. As such, I am instituting some reasonable precautions as preventative steps to help our faith communities, and the region as a whole, address this threat and stay healthy.

The following directives will apply until further notice:

- Distribution of the Precious Blood during the Eucharist is temporarily suspended;
- The manner of reception of Holy Communion, whether on the tongue or in the hand, must be properly received (see instruction);
- All priests, deacons and communion ministers are to thoroughly wash and disinfect their hands prior to Mass and distribution of Holy Communion;
- Holy water fonts should be cleaned and drained on a weekly basis;
- Collection baskets, if at all possible, should not be passed. (I recommend placing a collection basket before the altar with parishioners processing, as in the communion rite, to place their offering in the basket);
- The exchange of the Sign of Peace through physical contact (typically a handshake) is temporarily suspended -- an alternate means of signifying peace should be utilized;
- Those who are sick or begin to feel ill are **not** obligated to attend Sunday Mass. In the interest of the health of the parish community **if a parishioner is ill, they are dispensed from attending Mass** and should stay home until they are well.

These precautions will take effect immediately and continue as long as deemed necessary. My staff will continue to monitor the situation and will provide updates as needed.

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Bishop's Livestock Brand

In addition, the following petitions should be included during the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass: ***“For those who are suffering in the current outbreak of sickness, that they might be healed; for the health professionals taking care of those in need, and that our merciful and loving Father will strengthen our faith and trust in his goodness and divine providence, let us pray to the Lord.”***

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael Warfel". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

Michael Warfel  
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings

Instructions for the reception of Holy Communion:

A communicant who comes forward to receive the Sacred Host is asked to make a specific act of adoration before receiving the Eucharist. In the United States, the US bishops have stipulated a bow of the head. Reception of Holy Communion in the hand has become the common form for reception in most parishes. However, reception of the Sacred Host on the tongue is also a common way for communicants to receive. Unfortunately, in both cases, a good number of communicants have not received proper instructions on how they are to receive in a dignified manner.

For reception of Holy Communion on the tongue, after saying “Amen” in response to the communion minister’s statement, “The Body of Christ,” the communicant should open the mouth wide and extend the tongue far enough so that the Sacred Host may be placed upon it without danger of the Host falling or spreading saliva to the fingers of the communion minister. It is important to extend the tongue, not merely open the mouth. It is also important not to bite the Host which often times ends up including fingers. Ministers of Holy Communion should be able to distribute Holy Communion without risk of touching the hands or the tongue.

The risk of transmitting infection when receiving on the tongue or hand is more or less equal. The Archdiocese of Portland consulted with two physicians regarding this issue, one of which is a specialist in immunology for the State of Oregon. When done properly, the reception of Holy Communion on the tongue or in the hand is minimal. The key is “done properly. The risk of touching the tongue and passing the saliva on to others is obviously a danger however the chance of touching someone’s hand is equally probable and one’s hands may actually have great exposure to viruses.

For reception of Holy Communion in the hand, after saying “Amen” in response to the communion minister’s statement, “The Body of Christ,” the communicant extends their hands with the right hand under the left in support (left handed persons may wish to place the left hand under the right). A “throne” is formed in the sign of an X-cross to receive the Sacred Host. The communicant should then step slightly to the side and reverently consume the Host. It is not acceptable to grab the Host with fingers. Should a communicatee have difficulty with use of his/her hands, it is preferable that they receive on the tongue. If Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion feel uncomfortable distributing Holy Communion either in the hand or on the tongue they should temporarily be excused from this ministry.

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