



Catholic Diocese of Victoria *Office of the Bishop*

1-4044 Nelthorpe Street, Victoria, BC V8X 2A1 - Tel: 250-479-1331 - Fax: 250-479-5423 - Web: rcdvictoria.org

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Dear People of God,

“Called to Embrace a New Pentecost”

The springtime of the first Pentecost, as the Holy Spirit descended upon the Disciples in the upper room, was made visible with a rushing wind and tongues of fire. The new springtime of reopening our liturgical gatherings is a Pentecost event that will be ushered in with a gentle breeze and a flame of patient love that speaks to the grace of tenderness. In a world gripped by the pandemonium of the Covid-19 pandemic, we must be the heralds of the Good News and the peace of Christ that shines through the cross and tribulation.

The joy of reopening our churches to celebrate together the Sacred Liturgy must unfold carefully, lest our hopeful return to our cherished sacramental life be dashed by haste and the dreaded spike in Covid-19 cases. We can learn much from our Church history. The quiet and small communities of the catacombs were defined by mutual trust and accountability, essential for the Church’s very survival and the earliest formulation of standards for Christian community as seen in the Acts of the Apostles. We too, must adapt to a new normal if we are to gather as models of Christian love and service to the larger community.

The return to our churches must be like the leaven in the dough, measured and small, however I am confident new strengths and graces will continue to emerge. This absence from the familiar has set us on a new path and a new apostolic adventure. We have perhaps learned that being a Catholic is so much more than attending church on Sunday, as important as that may be. Like the analogy of the water from the village well, faith is to be given away and shared with the whole household, for we do not live at the well.

Another learning that has come forward because of our experience with Covid -19 is that we have experienced the lock-down and lockout of thousands of Christians in the world, including our own Diocese and country, due to geographical and existential marginalization. We have been privileged to live a solidarity with so many who rarely, or only occasionally, gather to celebrate the Sacramental life, or hear the Gospel preached. My prayer and great hope is that this experience of want and need will have awakened in all of us a new horizon of hope and missionary zeal that will drive us outward beyond a faith of self-preservation, to a faith of giving it all up for the least of these.

As we prepare to re-open the doors of our churches, three considerations are essential:

1. Stable and identifiable communities for worship;
2. Social distancing and sanitization;
3. Tenderness, patience and kindness are necessary virtues, as we are all vulnerable.

Stable identifiable communities for worship that will gather in churches must be under 50 people, and smaller churches will mean that there will be less than 50 to maintain the two meter social distancing requirement. This will take careful planning and organization with some kind of pre-registration. Opening the doors and just letting people come as they please would be irresponsible and has the potential to create big problems at the church door. In larger parishes, it will be impossible to accommodate every one for the Sunday Liturgy; therefore, the weekdays present an important opportunity for participation. Separate directives and guidelines with specific protocols to help the pastors and parishes plan for reopening our churches will provide further direction.

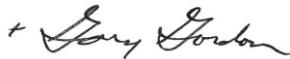
There are enormous benefits to creating stable communities of less than 50 people who are pre-registered/assigned to attend a particular Mass:

- a. We will have an opportunity to get to know the people who worship together.
- b. We will be encouraged to become accountable and co-responsible for ministries, faith and life sharing, and even the sanitization of the place we sit and touch.
- c. We know the community to be a crucial aspect of a healthy Christian life, and this will be the time to live the dream of authentic witness, co-responsible, and missionary discipleship.
- d. We will imagine the outreach and the leadership potential.
- e. We will be able to understand contact tracing for if one member of our little community tested positive for Covid-19, the other 49 people could be immediately tested and helped. If people are permitted to travel from Mass to Mass, the possibility of an outbreak could close the whole parish for a very long time. This type of controlled, organized group will be helpful for the health system in the event of an outbreak of Covid-19.
- f. We are called to be the model of a loving family that learns to live with strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

We know that it is an act of supreme charity for another to stay home if we are sick or unwell. The vulnerable elders and those with compromised health are encouraged to stay home. The live streaming Masses from the Cathedral will continue. We must avoid all semblance of distinction for the people who are fit and able to attend Mass and those who participate remotely. Every part of the Body of Christ is essential and it is the weaker members who deserve the greatest honour.

As we move towards a new horizon of hope, I pray that the Spirit of Pentecost will enflame our hearts with grace and tenderness. Jesus in the gift of the Holy Spirit this Pentecost speaks to us as He did to the frightened disciples in the storm tossed boat “do not be afraid”. In our little lifeboat, we row onward together, pulling in the many poor souls adrift and too weak to swim as we press on to a shore we have not yet seen.... “Do not be afraid”.

In Communion,



Most Rev. Gary Gordon
Bishop of Victoria

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