

July 15, 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

As you have heard, the Catholic bishops of Pennsylvania have issued statements indicating that the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass, which went into effect in March 2020 — just as the pandemic began significantly impacting all facets of life in the United States — will soon be lifted. I am reinstating the obligation to attend Mass in person on Sundays and holy days in the Diocese of Erie beginning on Sunday, Aug. 15, 2021, the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As always, the obligation does not apply to those with serious illness or health risks, as well as their caregivers.

For most of us, the thought of a global pandemic impacting nearly every aspect of our lives had never crossed our minds. As I said in my letter to you in March of 2020, given the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, I made the best decisions I could for the good of the community, especially the most vulnerable among us.

I am deeply grateful to the clergy in our diocese who did everything they could to respond to the challenges. Many used technology to include parishioners in livestreamed Masses, prayer services and events. Others were creative in their efforts to remain in touch, assuring you of their prayers and support. Still others were called upon in these extraordinary circumstances to be present to COVID patients and their families.

I also want to extend my thanks to each of you. People in every stage of life were faced with significant sacrifices — from children attending school remotely and adults navigating unexpected challenges, to young adults rethinking social interactions and postponing important plans. All the while, our elderly parishioners faced a time of deep isolation. My heart is especially with those of you whose livelihoods were disrupted and those of you who lost loved ones due to the pandemic. I know your pain was increased as a result of the many restrictions we had to endure.

St. Paul tells us we are to rejoice in the Lord always. While I will not minimize the pain and difficulties we have faced — and will continue to face in new ways — I encourage you to reflect on what he says in his letter to the Philippians 4:4-7:



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"Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Many of you have begun returning to Sunday Mass, and I am hearing from pastors that there is a sense of renewal and of deepened appreciation for the Eucharist and for our parish communities. It is my hope and my prayer we all will continue to grow in our faith and live in the peace God promises.

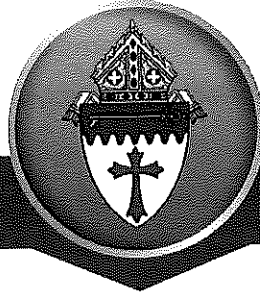
Our Lady of Guadalupe, patroness of the Americas, pray for us.

St. Patrick, patron of the Diocese of Erie, pray for us.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+Lawrence T. Persico

The Most Reverend Lawrence T. Persico, JCL
Bishop of Erie



7.15.2021

Dispensation lifted: Catholics return to Sunday Mass Aug. 15*Significant majority are already attending*

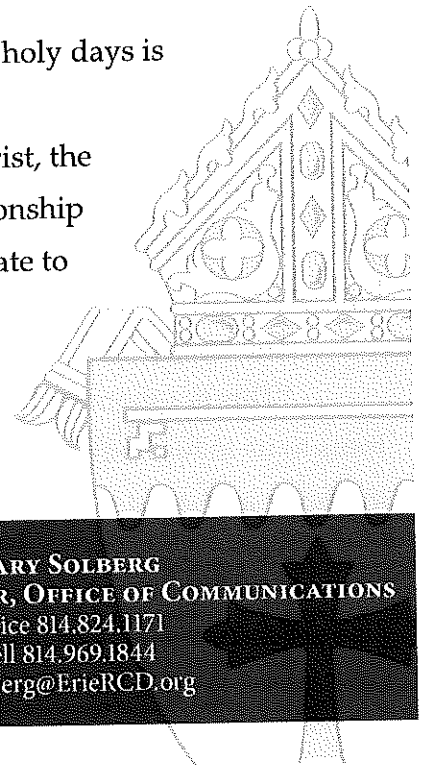
The Catholic bishops of Pennsylvania have issued a joint statement indicating that the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass, which went into effect in March 2020 — just as the pandemic significantly impacted all facets of life in the United States — will soon be lifted. The bishops are reinstating the obligation to attend Mass in person on Sundays and holy days beginning on Sunday, Aug. 15, 2021, the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. As always, the obligation does not apply to those with serious illness or health risks, as well as their caregivers.

"I am very pleased that the effects of the pandemic have subsided enough that we can finally gather safely for Mass on Sundays and holy days," the Most Rev. Lawrence T. Persico, bishop of Erie, said. "The number of people already attending Sunday Mass has been growing steadily, and I know people are truly celebrating the opportunity to receive the Eucharist and to be back in their parish communities."

Bishop Persico explained that attending Mass on Sundays and holy days is important for a number of reasons.

"We gather at Mass to receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the source of our existence," he said. "It's a reminder of the special relationship we have with God and with each other in community. We are fortunate to have an opportunity to honor God and to give God glory, praise and thanks each week."

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The bishop said now that the pandemic seems to be easing, he has seen people coming back to their parish communities with a deepened appreciation. He looks forward to having all members of parishes return to Mass.

"The community is not whole when some are missing," he said.

According to the statement released by Pennsylvania's bishops, available at www.eriecd.org/news/news-releases.html, "We have all known and felt the impact of COVID-19 in so many ways as individuals and families, among friends and at work. It has been a time of hardship and struggle, of separation and isolation. It has also had an impact on our lives of faith. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, has been with us throughout this very difficult period and is most especially near to us when we encounter him in the Eucharist. The Eucharist offers us his healing and peace, his mercy and reconciliation. It is time for everyone to return to the Eucharist with renewed faith and joy."

The joint statement also emphasizes that the obligation to attend Mass, "as is always the case, does not apply to those who are seriously ill, have a serious health risk, as well as those who have serious anxiety about being a part of large groups at this time." It points out that the obligation does not apply to those who care for those who cannot attend Mass in person. The bishops encourage those who are legitimately excused from Mass on Sundays and holy days to spend time in prayer, to meditate on the death and resurrection of the Lord, to read Scripture and to unite themselves to Christ. They also urge people to view a livestreamed or broadcast Mass intended for those who cannot participate in person.

Parishes across the Diocese of Erie are preparing to launch a campaign, *Re-membering Our Sunday Story*, to help ensure that Catholics are warmly invited to return to worship on Sunday, to the joy of encountering Christ both in the Eucharist and within the life of their parish communities.

"I asked our Faith Formation Office to create a team for this purpose early this year," Bishop Persico said, "and between now and the end of the year, a wide array of resources will be made available to parishes. There is a great sense of joy as parish communities have begun coming together, and we want to help people grow in their sense of renewal and gratitude."

The bishop said he is grateful to be making the announcement.

"This is a moment to thank God anew for the great gift of the Mass and the real presence of Jesus to us in his body and blood as well as the joy of gathering together as people of faith, united in prayer and good works," he said.

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Bishop Persico will be available for interviews on Thursday, July 15 at 11 am. Please contact Anne-Marie Welsh at amwelsh@eriecd.org or 814.746.6889 to reserve a time.