



Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown

Office of the Bishop

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A letter to the faithful in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown July 15, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I recently spoke with a family who returned from a delightful vacation. Three generations of that family live in different states and this was their first time to be together since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the memories of that family vacation are the stories and photos they shared of cherished human experiences, including the birth of new children, Baptisms, First Holy Communions, Confirmations, weddings and graduations which not everyone experienced in person during the pandemic.

I have also listened to people from all over our diocese who have not been coming to Sunday Mass or receiving the Holy Eucharist since the time our churches first closed as a precaution. We have gone through a long dry spell of not encountering our Lord and each other in our churches. Thanks be to God, things are improving. With the help of vaccinations and social distancing, the dangers brought by the COVID-19 virus have diminished and our churches are open.

All of this points to the conclusion that the dispensation from the obligation to participate at Mass on Sundays and Holy Days is no longer necessary. After consulting with all the Bishops of Pennsylvania who are each announcing the same directive, I hereby decree that beginning August 15, 2021, the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass is ended.

There is no obligation for those who are unable to attend Mass due to a serious or chronic health condition. If you are ill or you provide care for someone who is ill and unable to attend Mass on Sunday and Holy Days, there is no need for any dispensation of permission. For those who are unable to attend Mass, you are strongly encouraged to view the broadcast of the Mass on television or via the internet. Priests, deacons, and extraordinary ministers may continue to bring Holy Communion to shut-ins.

During the extended time of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have spoken with persons who have experienced being alienated from God, their family, friends and neighbors, and even from themselves. As a result of not being in church on Sunday, many persons described an experience in which “God’s voice is not heard, the quiet joy of love is not felt, and the desire to do good fades.” That description is given by Pope Francis in the introduction to his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*. Even though he wrote it nearly 10 years ago, the message certainly fits the circumstances of so many people today.

Pope Francis reminds us that we do not have to remain in such emptiness. He says, “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them.” He goes on to say, “No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.” And Pope Francis explains that “the Lord will not disappoint those who take the risk and take a step toward Jesus; to realize that he is already there, waiting for us with open arms.”

The Lord Jesus waits for us, you and me, at his table; at the altar in your parish church which is your spiritual home. As you respond to the Lord's invitation, you may be wondering what to expect. One person recently told me that during this time away from Church, she has had difficulty praying. She asked, "I wonder if the Lord will recognize me when we get back to church?" In thinking about that person's concern, I thought of what Pope Francis says in *The Joy of the Gospel*: "Time and time again the Lord Jesus bears us on his shoulders. No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love. With a tenderness which never disappoints, but is always capable of restoring our joy, he makes it possible for us to lift up our heads and start anew."

It is time for us, all of us, to start anew. I invite all of you to come to your place at the Lord's table. Come back to that same pew at the same Mass time that was part of your regular Sunday routine. For so long, we went without the joy that comes from the little things of life. But the Lord tells us: "My child, treat yourself well, according to your means... Do not deprive yourself of the day's enjoyment (Sirach 14:11, 14).

So much good and so much joy comes to us when we sit at the dinner table with family and friends. How much more awaits us when we come to the table of the Lord each Sunday where we offer praise and thanks to God, for his merciful love is without end!

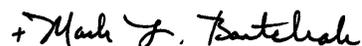
The Church reminds us that we have an obligation to come every Sunday and on other important days during the year. But besides that obligation, we should not forget the vocation that we all share with each other; with our families, friends, and neighbors. It is our calling to proclaim the Gospel; with its truth about our Lord Jesus Christ and the saving power of his death and resurrection; and with all the joy and satisfaction that comes with sharing that truth with those who hunger and thirst for an encounter, or renewed encounter with God's love.

As Pope Francis reminds us in *The Joy of the Gospel* that this encounter "blossoms into an enriching friendship and it liberates us from our narrowness and self-absorption," as so many have experienced from the limits placed on us during the pandemic. And one last thought from *The Joy of the Gospel*. Pope Francis reminds us that through our encounter with Christ, who is the incarnation of God's love, we become fully human.

Brothers and Sisters, the ultimate encounter with Christ for us here on earth is in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrifice of the Mass through which we meet the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. It is time for all of us to come back to that experience. I invite everyone to assist each other in making their way back to their proper place on the Lord's Day. And if anyone is in need of sacramental Reconciliation to assist you in coming back, the sacrament is available.

Come to the table of the Lord; the table of mercy and love. The Lord invites all of us to meet him there.

With prayers and best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Mark L. Bartchak". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Most Rev. Mark L. Bartchak
Bishop of Altoona-Johnstown