

PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF PENINSULAR MALAYSIA DATED 12TH OF MARCH 2020

SUSPENSION OF MASSES AND OTHER PUBLIC GATHERINGS OF THE FAITHFUL IN THE FACE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dear Brother Priests, religious and lay faithful,

The past few weeks have been a difficult time for all of us as we had to face a three-pronged challenge of a national political crisis, the exponential growth of Covid-19 cases, and the disruption and alteration of many of our cherished Catholic customs for public health safety reasons. As your shepherds, we are fully aware of the pain, confusion and anxiety that many of you are experiencing.

We thank you for your cooperation in helping us implement some of the pastoral recommendations and public safety measures in each parish, for your prayers and for your continued resilience in trusting God's Providence and deliverance.

Despite our expectation that the situation will improve, the situation has in fact worsened over the past weeks. Yesterday, the World Health Organisation (WHO), which has been monitoring the development of the situation world-wide, has declared that Covid-19 is a pandemic, which by definition, means "the worldwide spread of a new disease." The Director-General of WHO, provided us with sobering details that "the number of cases of Covid-19 outside China has increased 13-fold, and the number of affected countries has tripled." By yesterday's count, we have 149 confirmed cases in Malaysia, which is an increase of 126 cases within a period of less than two weeks. The Malaysian Ministry of Health issued additional medical advisories which include postponing all "mass gatherings."

Over the past weeks, we the three arch/bishops of the ecclesiastical province in Peninsular Malaysia, have issued several recommendations, advisories and chancery notices introducing both pastoral and safety measures in our effort to combat the spread of infection. These steps, we had hoped, would serve to mitigate the risk of spreading the infection but we also realise that we cannot adequately or fully exclude it altogether, especially in large gatherings taking place within confined spaces.

As we witness the rise in numbers in our country and the uncontained explosion in other countries where both civil and religious authorities had been slow in responding to the imminent threat, it is now time for us to put in place further measures, which may appear to be extreme, but we recognise that our failure to do so may have dire consequences resulting in an explosive outbreak, putting the most vulnerable in our communities at risk and placing further pressure on our heavily strained health services. It is therefore now our decision, a decision taken with a heavy heart and after much prayer and having consulted the panel of medical specialists in this field, that we wish to implement the following additional pre-emptive measures which are necessary to prevent a further spread of this viral infection:

1. **All weekend and weekday public masses will be suspended from 14th of March (or the 13th of March, if the state's weekend begins on Friday) to the 29th of March 2020.** This coincides with the public school holidays. We therefore exempt all Catholics from fulfilling their Sunday obligation of assisting/ attending Mass during this period. This exemption is a temporary measure in the face of the current crisis. We will continue to monitor and review the situation to determine if the above period of suspension needs to be extended beyond the 29th of March 2020. Please note that the Archdiocesan Social Communication Ministry of the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur is making arrangements to broadcast Masses over the weekends in the various major languages and weekday Masses in English.
2. Priests are still required to offer Masses in private for the spiritual good of the Church, the intentions of the faithful, and the alleviation of the present crisis.
3. All catechism classes should be closed and catechetical programmes and activities should be cancelled during this same period.
4. All meetings, gatherings, formations, RCIA sessions, fellowships and events in church or in the BEC are to be cancelled and put on hold during this period.
5. Any weddings or funerals are to be conducted privately with guests limited to immediate family members and close friends. Please contact your parish priest for further details.
6. For the sacraments of penance (confession), anointing of the sick and Holy Communion for the home bound, kindly contact the parish office for an appointment with your parish priest. The priests are to take the necessary health precautions in administering the Sacraments.
7. Churches, chapels or prayer rooms (where applicable), shall remain open for private and personal prayer and Eucharistic adoration according to the times scheduled by the respective parishes. Please contact your parish office/ parish website for details.
7. **We also declare that the 19th of March 2020, Solemnity of Saint Joseph, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary, protector of the Church, be designated as a day of prayer and fasting to invoke Saint Joseph's intercession and God's intervention for an end to this crisis.**

Although, a broadcasted Mass is no substitute for the obligation to assist/ attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation, with the suspension of public Masses on Sundays and weekdays, watching the televised Masses could serve as a form of spiritual "devotion." Other

recommended devotions should include reading the Word of God, especially the prescribed readings for the Mass of the day, praying the Holy Rosary, making an act of spiritual communion, fasting, making other devotions e.g. Way of the Cross, Divine Mercy, etc.

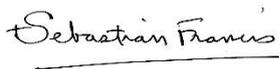
We understand that many of the faithful would be extremely pained by this decision and we would agree that there is no equivalent substitute to the inestimable spiritual value of the Holy Eucharist. But the present crisis leaves us with only two choices, to either continue with our present measures of mitigation, OR to implement the whole range of social-distancing measures, which includes shutting down all mass gatherings of individuals to prevent further transmission of this virus. There is no evidence from countries which are now facing large outbreaks that the first option will be sufficient. On the other hand, the experiences of other countries have taught us that social-distancing is able to contain massive outbreaks.

The current measures we are taking are also in accordance with the recommendation of the Ministry of Health issued on 11th of March 2020 to postpone all mass gatherings.

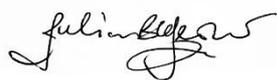
We continue to place our hope and trust in Almighty God and pray that He will bring a swift end to this crisis.

May Almighty God bless you and your families with good health, peace and abundant graces.

Your Shepherds in Christ,



Rt. Rev. Sebastian Francis, D.D
Bishop of Penang



Most Rev. Julian Leow, D.D.
Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur



Rt. Rev. Bernard Paul, D.D.
Bishop of Malacca-Johore