



16 March 2020

Dear Fathers and Faithful of the Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan,

The spread of COVID-19 in our province and around the world is a matter of deep concern for all of us. This situation changes by the day, if not the hour. The world has indeed become a “global village”. What happens in one part of the world has its impact on the rest.

I only recently issued protocols for our response in this archdiocese to the coronavirus threat. Already, the realities have changed, and I find myself having to issue further directives. Alberta’s Chief Medical Officer had initially called for a ban on gatherings of 250 people or more, worship services excluded. Late Sunday afternoon, she had to dismiss the exemption of religious services. A further prohibition is placed upon gatherings in excess of fifty people where it is anticipated that high-risk individuals such as seniors are present. I see this as applying to all of our Masses.

Be assured that this is not just about us. Many dioceses in Canada and elsewhere are taking the same or similar measures. What I write here has been discussed among the Alberta/NWT bishops. The Pope has even declared the Vatican in lock-down mode! Public services have been cancelled throughout Italy, and other majority-Catholic countries.

We are hearing in many news items and commentaries that we are in exceptional times, that are calling for exceptional measures. We count on these to be temporary, only for as long as they are needed. We pray that this will not be long, but we have no way of knowing how long, or what further decisions may be called for.

Effective immediately, I decree the following:

**Masses.** All weekend and weekday public Masses in the Archdiocese of Grouard-McLennan are cancelled. For the duration of this period, I grant to all

the Catholic faithful of our Archdiocese a dispensation from their Sunday obligation. Since the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is the very heart of our Catholic life, I know that the inability to gather for Mass is a cause of great suffering. Let us accept this as our civic duty at this time, and offer this moment in sacrifice to God for the sake of all who are ill or dying from the COVID-19 virus.

In these circumstances, an alternative is to follow the celebration of the Eucharist on television. This is not “the same thing”, of course, but it may be the best we can do in these circumstances. Mass can be found on several channels and websites, such as Vision TV, Salt & Light (in French on Sel et Lumière), EWTN, or online at <https://dailytvmass.com/>

**Parish Missions.** All parish missions are cancelled.

**Confessions & Penitential Celebrations.** All parish penitential celebrations are cancelled. Priests will remain available to hear confessions, but the use of the confessional is prohibited throughout the period of this pandemic. Instead, confessions will be heard face-to-face in reconciliation chapels or other spaces that both protect confidentiality and allow the recommended distance between priest and penitent – two metres (six feet). Those who wish to confess anonymously will need to wait until after the pandemic; the obligation to confess serious sin once annually can be met at any time throughout the year. Of course, our priests stand ready to visit persons in the hospital or confined to home who request Holy Communion, Confession or the Sacrament of the Sick. In every case, proper hygiene must be practiced.

With concern to Seniors Homes that have imposed restrictions on visitors, the pastor should first receive permission from the facility administrator to enter and exit the premises to administer the sacraments to those residents seeking them.

**Holy Week.** With respect to the Liturgies of Holy Week, I hope before March 30<sup>th</sup> to be able to give further direction as to how or whether these liturgies will be celebrated.

**Sacraments.** All celebrations of Baptism, First Eucharist, First Reconciliation and Confirmation are postponed until the Chief Medical Officer has advised that the pandemic has ended. Parish priests will then schedule these with the persons and families involved. This directive applies likewise to the celebration of initiation into the Catholic Church at the Easter Vigil. This, too, is postponed until the Chief Medical Officer has deemed the pandemic to be over.

**Sacramental Preparation.** Sacramental preparation classes for both children and adults are cancelled; they may resume once these restrictions are lifted. Parents are encouraged to pray with their child during this time of waiting and anticipation of the reception of a sacrament. In the case of the RCIA, the pastor or catechist may proceed to the personal interviews of the candidates to determine their readiness but group gatherings are prohibited.

**Funerals.** Funerals may continue to be celebrated in our churches. However, funeral homes are receiving their own directives from the Chief Medical Officer. In consultation with the family of the deceased, participation in funeral services may have to be limited to comply with prevailing medical directives. Public receptions following the funeral liturgy should not take place.

**Open Churches.** I encourage priests and parishes to keep their churches open during some part of each day, so that the faithful may individually be able to spend time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Holy water fonts will remain empty, and disinfectant wipes and hand wash should be available at the back of the church. These are not to become public gatherings but a time for personal prayer. Especially in this uncertain and extraordinary time, we want to offer in this way the assurance that the Church remains close to you and ready to accompany you through this or any difficulty.

I ask all of you to join with me in praying for a speedy end to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has already disrupted human activity throughout the world and in our own communities. May God grant healing to those who are ill, and eternal rest to those who have died. May the Lord's blessing come upon our medical professionals and civic authorities who strive to keep all of us safe with enormous effort and great skill.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R." with a small flourish at the end.

Most Rev. Gerard Pettipas, C.Ss.R.  
Archbishop of Grouard-McLennan