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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
DIOCESE OF KNOXVILLE

April 2, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

I greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and hold you in my prayers during this difficult time in the life of our Church, our country, and the world. Presently, the coronavirus pandemic has taken center stage, with alarming statistics and increasing numbers of sick people and deaths. My dear brothers and sisters who reside in this wonderful diocese throughout East Tennessee, I call on you to lift this COVID-19 crisis in prayer. Pray that God will heal our land and all the countries of the world. It is the first thing we should do. It is the most important thing we can do. It is the thing we should do at all times, as the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, to "pray without ceasing."

With that being said, as we approach Palm Sunday and Holy Week, I feel compelled as your bishop to share two pastoral thoughts with you. First, as you are aware by now, public Masses are canceled in the Diocese of Knoxville until further notice. As such, I know there is great sadness shared by each of you in not being able to participate publicly at Mass and not being able to receive the Holy Eucharist, the source and summit of our faith. Please know that I sincerely and wholeheartedly share in your sadness and disappointment.

During this time, I encourage each of you, as frequently as you can, to watch Mass via livestream or television and at the appropriate time make a "spiritual Communion". St. John Paul II writes that "it is good to cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist." This practice of "spiritual Communion" has happily been established in the Church for centuries and recommended by saints who were masters of the spiritual life. St. Teresa of Jesus wrote: "When you do not receive Communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual Communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you." To make a "spiritual Communion" simply pray these words: My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

Second, I want to encourage each of you to pray the Way of the Cross through livestream or television tomorrow (Friday, April 3rd) and Good Friday (April 10th). The Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus will livestream the Stations of the Cross after the noon Mass tomorrow (at 12:30 p.m.) and at 12:00 noon on Good Friday. I make this request because the experience of suffering and of the cross touches all of us. I know this pandemic and the restrictions put in place to control the spread of the coronavirus are difficult! There are misunderstandings, conflicts, worry for the future of our children, and especially worry of succumbing to sickness and death. These days, too, the situation of many families is made worse by the threat of unemployment and other negative effects of the economic crisis. The Way of the Cross, which we can spiritually retrace, invites all of us, and families in particular, to contemplate Christ crucified in order to have the strength to overcome difficulties.

My brothers and sisters, the cross of Christ is the supreme sign of God's love for every one of us, the superabundant response to every person's need for love. In times of trouble, when our families may have to face pain and adversity, let us look to Christ's cross. There we can find the courage and strength to press on; there we can repeat with firm hope the words of St. Paul: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:35, 37).

During this time of trial, as your bishop, the shepherd of the faithful of East Tennessee, I want to remind you that you are not alone; your family is not alone. Jesus is present to you with His love; He sustains each of you by His grace; and He grants you the strength needed to carry on, to make sacrifices, and to overcome every obstacle.

We must move forward with faithful, unceasing prayer, as well as persistence, patience, and grace. God bless you all!

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Reverend Richard F. Stika
Bishop of Knoxville