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PASTORAL LETTER

Finding Peace of Conscience in the Suspension of Public Liturgical Celebrations

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. The advent and the widespread of the COVID-19 took the world and many countries unaware. Emergency efforts made to contain and stop the disease necessitated the imperative of social distancing and avoiding large gatherings of persons. As most of our liturgical celebrations involve such large crowds, the regulations of the government affected our continuous celebrations. When the maximum number of persons was reduced to 50, efforts were put in place by some dioceses to ensure that more Masses were celebrated. But when it was further reduced to 20, given that most parishes in the various dioceses affected have members in their hundreds and thousands, it became clear that it was inevitable that liturgical celebrations should be suspended until further notice by those dioceses.

2. While this measure is understandable to some, there are others who find it difficult to understand why the Church should suspend her liturgical celebrations. Some have expressed their reservations out of a genuine concern that comes from a disturbed conscience. They wonder what has become of the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of obligation. Furthermore, how can they fail to participate in the Holy Week ceremonies which are the heart of the Church's liturgical celebrations? Others ask why the Church should bow to Government regulations: Is our faith not superior to such regulations? Underlying this idea of faith is the belief that since our salvation comes from faith and with faith we can cure all diseases, should persons not be encouraged to attend more Masses at this time, rather than suspend their participation?

3. I wish to address these few lines as words of encouragement to all Catholics who find themselves in this dilemma of how to reconcile their faith with the current situation, hoping that we will be able to find some peace of conscience.

4. Certain fundamental principles of our faith should be recalled here. The first is that the Catholic faith is intrinsically rational; that is, faith always goes with reason. Whenever the expression of faith is not reasonable, then such faith loses its Christian character. It can become confused with superstition, fundamentalism and fanaticism. The faith is intrinsically rational because Christ came for us men and for our salvation. If he came for us, he has to come to us in a way that we can accept him. Since reason is an essential faculty that defines man and differentiates him from other animals, the faith by its nature has to be rational. Therefore, in the way we understand the faith and the different doctrines of the Church, we must always see how the faith is in harmony with reason. This is what has given Christianity credibility down through the ages.

5. Second, in her understanding of the necessity of the sacraments for salvation, following the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas, and expressed in the best harmony of faith and reason, the Church has always taught that the necessity of the sacraments is not an absolute necessity, but a necessity of the most suitable means. In other words, the sacraments are not the only means of salvation, but they are the most suitable means of salvation. This enables the Catholic Church to teach how those outside her visible boundaries can be saved, even when this salvation is ultimately linked to the Church's celebration of the paschal mysteries (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22 § 5; *Lumen Gentium* 16; *Ad Gentes*, 7). It is for this reason that every Mass is offered for the living and the dead. The Catechism of the Catholic Church expresses this understanding of the necessity of the sacraments when it noted that "God has bound salvation to the Sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments." (1257)

6. Third, one way the Church ensures that her members keep the Sabbath day or Sunday holy is the attendance at Mass. Here the divine precept which cannot be changed is to keep the Sabbath day holy, while the Church's law which is given and can be regulated according to different circumstances is to attend Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation. In order to emphasize and show how this law of attending Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation is important, all Catholics are obliged to attend

Mass on Sunday and Holy Days of Obligation under the pain of mortal sin. But the committal of mortal sins does not only depend on the object of the act, the circumstance and intention of the object are also important. While there are certain grave acts that are intrinsically evil and remain sinful irrespective of the circumstance and intention such as abortion, killing of an innocent person, contraception, etc, there are other grave acts that their commission (or commission by omission) could be altered by the circumstances and intention, especially when they do not flow directly from divine law. The omission of Mass on a Sunday and Holy of Obligation is a grave act. But the intention and circumstance could alter it or even change its moral character. It is a common knowledge that illness, old age or physical impossibility can legitimately hinder someone from attending Mass on a Sunday. In such a case, there is no sin. When such illness is feigned or the physical impossibility results from lack of preparation, then the person could become culpable of sin to some degree.

7. Based on these three fundamental principles, I wish to say, that in the current situation of COVID-19 that necessitates the imperative of social distancing, it is in harmony with faith and reason to suspend liturgical celebrations. The omission of the sacraments by the faithful due to a physical impossibility that is due to no fault of theirs is not a sin. If Christ came for us men and for our salvation, and if we celebrate the sacraments for the good of the human person, both bodily and spiritually, the suspension of liturgical celebrations for this good does not undermine the Mass, rather, it helps to realize one of its purposes of serving the good of the human person. A genuine fidelity to the law often calls for some departure from the letters of the law in order to enter its true spirit. We know that if the sacraments can serve souls in mysterious ways, even those who are outside the Church, more so will it continue in the many Masses that priests are continually offering for the faithful daily in these times. This should reassure us that we are not alone. The Church has not left you without the Mass. Your spiritual participation through spiritual communion, a meditation on the daily readings, following the celebration of Mass online is an invitation to continue the "*Ite Missa est*" that you hear at the end of every Mass. Elongate this call to share the peace of Christ you were entrusted with in the Masses you have been attending, just as our spiritual hunger to participate at Mass should lead us to continually pray that this plague would come to an end soon.

8. The harmony between faith and reason necessitates that Catholics should be faithful citizens. If we follow a saviour who paid his taxes (Matt. 17:24-27) and asks us to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God (Matt. 22:21) then we have a duty to obey all just laws of government (Rom. 13:1). If we criticize the government when they do not do well, we should cooperate with them when they make laws that are directed towards our good. This is also, especially when such laws, as we have explained, are not in conflict with our faith and are destined for the good of all. To disobey just government laws out of a misconceived fidelity to the faith should be ranked under the heading of fundamentalism and fanaticism, which distort, rather than, show the truth of our faith.

9. The difficulties that the current situation present to those who cannot understand why public Masses should not be celebrated shows the need for catechesis. I ask all, especially priests, catechists and those entrusted with teaching the faith to endeavour to enlighten their brethren. Some have expressed fears that after these times, many will no longer take attendance at Mass seriously. That again can only be the result of ignorance and bad formation. It is a time-honoured saying that the exception does not make the rule. To take exception to the rule in these times to mean a weakening of the precept of Sunday obligation to attend Mass would amount to acting out of ignorance or bad faith. Just as legalism, which is a slavish adherence to the letters of the law, is not fidelity, so does permissiveness, which undermines the law, not amount to a genuine exception from the letters of the law. To denigrate attendance of Mass when no circumstance hinders our physical presence is to betray our lack of love for God and his Church.

10. At this point, the imperative of social distancing to avoid a widespread of a disease that would eliminate lives demands that it is better to err on the side of caution than a bit of reckless adventure into a world of faith without reason. It will amount to a lack of respect for life to encourage any form of gathering that could bring about the spread of a contagious and deadly disease. To celebrate Mass publicly within a context that does not respect life is an abuse of the purpose of the Mass which promotes the teaching of Christ who came to give life and give it in abundance (John 10:10).

11. The pain of not being able to participate at Mass that many feel, is understandable. But we can make this pain spiritually fruitful. It is a pain that hits us at the heart of the Church's liturgical celebration: the Holy

Week. In two of these days, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, we do not ordinarily celebrate Mass. Those days represent the time that Christ bore the depth of our human suffering. He accepted death on Good Friday in order to free us from death. In this way, he tells us that the death that the pandemic COVID-19 threatens does not have the last word. On Holy Saturday, he descended into hell to be in solidarity with all those who awaited salvation. In this way, he offers solidarity with the whole of humanity. On Holy Saturday, Christ tells us that we are not alone. He tells those who are quarantined at this time that they are not alone. Only those who do not carry their cross with Christ can experience loneliness. Just as the deprivations of Good Friday and Holy Saturday led to the celebration of the Mass on Easter Sunday, let us make use of this time to spiritually deepen our hunger for the Mass so that we can prayerfully look forward to when we shall be able to participate in it once more.

12. In his homily at the Extraordinary "*Urbi et Orbi*" Blessing on March 27, 2020, Pope Francis asks us not to be afraid, "because the Lord will not leave us at the mercy of the storm." Let us be hopeful and trust that God who knows how to bring out the best from every situation will lead us to a safe harbour through the ever-faithful intercession of Mary, the Virgin Most Powerful. Through her help, may we find peace in these troubled times.

Sincerely yours in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Augustine Obiora Akubeze', preceded by a small cross symbol.

+Augustine Obiora Akubeze
Archbishop of Benin City and President of CBCN
29 March 2020