



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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Dear Faithful of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese,

We have been living through most unusual and trying times. I hope that your faith in God has helped you to stay calm amidst the storms that rage around us.

As I approach the first anniversary of my installation as your bishop (August 22), let me address a few matters of mutual concern: the Bishop Bransfield scandal; the Coronavirus pandemic; and the issue of racism.

Regarding Bishop Bransfield, neither the Apostolic Nuncio to the United States (the Pope's ambassador) nor I have heard anything in over five months from the Holy See in Rome on the plan of amends I submitted for Bishop Bransfield. The Coronavirus pandemic struck Italy hard, so that may account for the delay. Please pray that this matter may soon be resolved.

With respect to the Coronavirus pandemic here, I thank you, our lay faithful and clergy, for the cooperation you have shown in observing the protective measures we have adopted so that we may have public liturgies in our parishes. I am especially grateful to the volunteers and staff who have been sanitizing our churches and serving as ushers. I would encourage young adults to step up and help us, so that the burden does not fall only on older folks. I also compliment you on the beautiful face masks many of you wear!

As far as we can determine, our protective measures have been effective. In the few cases in which a person at Mass later tested positive for the COVID-19 virus, the respective Health Departments and parishioners were informed and persons in close contact with the infected parishioner were quarantined. As of this writing, contact tracing has not indicated that anyone was infected at Mass. We must continue to observe our safety protocols when worshipping in church. This is no time to give in to "pandemic fatigue" and relax our vigilance.

If you are healthy, go to Mass to hear God's Word with your brothers and sisters in the faith and receive the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist. But if you fear that

going to Mass could be dangerous to you or others, remember that the obligation to go to Sunday Mass remains suspended.

We gave permission to our parishes to open up to some events other than liturgies. We must proceed cautiously in this area, since the number of positive cases in our State has been rising. Small meetings – for example, a Pastoral or Finance Council meeting, a small RCIA gathering – may be held while observing protective measures and without serving food and drink. Unfortunately, larger gatherings – parish dinners, funeral luncheons, Bingo – we cannot safely do at this time. They can easily become the setting for spreading the virus. We must keep the health and safety of others in mind. That is called “love of neighbor.”

Are there any spiritual benefits in this pandemic? I have asked Confirmation candidates how they have lived their faith during the pandemic. They said they prayed, read Scripture, watched live-streamed Masses and tried to help around the house more. Those are true benefits! Being deprived of the Eucharist can also increase our desire for the sacrament, as fasting increases our desire for food. And aren't we more aware of how social we are by nature? We need one another and want to be together. I pray that normal gatherings may soon be possible.

With respect to racism, the months after the death of Mr. George Floyd in Minneapolis have seen great social unrest and protests over racism. While the legal segregation I saw as a boy has been overcome, other forms of racism still exist. Why is it still harder for Black men and women with the same educational background and experience as white persons to get a job for which they apply? Why have city neighborhoods and schools been re-segregated a half century after desegregation rulings and open housing laws? Even apart from individual's intentions, racism crawls under the surface of institutions and social life.

West Virginia has a much smaller Black population than surrounding States and I am no expert on the situation here. Reports say protests in West Virginia after Mr. Floyd's death were peaceful. People have the right and the obligation to work for justice. Violence, however, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, assaults the pursuit of justice while non-violent methods over time bring better results.

It is important that all of us recognize that our attitude towards people affects how we relate to them. The cry “Black Lives Matter” is a cry from the heart of a people who have suffered in this country for generations and will not sit idly by. (This is distinct from the organization of the same name, whose positions on some issues contradict Catholic belief and teaching.) As followers of Jesus Christ, who suffered, died and rose from the dead for all people, regardless of race or origin, we must examine ourselves honestly about how we regard people of different races

and ethnic groups. Change begins in the mind and heart; otherwise, any changes in behavior will only be superficial and likely will evaporate like the morning mist.

Along with self-examination, studying the issues can help us understand why protests and even violence have broken out. I encourage you to read *Open Wide Our Hearts*, the US Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Racism from November, 2018, that sees racism in a broad context that includes immigrants and Native Americans as well as African Americans. (Go to [usccb.org](http://usccb.org).) Where possible, dialogue with members of other races and ethnic groups can prove illuminating and foster mutual understanding. I encourage parishes to look into this possibility.

Does harping on "white guilt" produce appropriate self-examination and change in white people? I honestly think it is more likely to provoke resentment than openness to change. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized that some white people were oppressed, just as were Blacks, which is why he included poor Southern whites in his Poor People's Campaign. But most white people have benefitted just from being white and it is fair to ask them to recognize this. What is unfair is to attribute personal moral guilt to them for a situation which they inherited. Judging members of any race by derogatory stereotypes is wrong. Jesus' words, *Judge not lest you be judged*, apply here. Let us face social injustices squarely but keep our focus on the issues and not attack persons. The essential thing is to form alliances to overcome injustices and build a more humane society.

As we look into the future, we do not know how long we will have to contend with the Coronavirus pandemic nor by what means or how long it will take to bleach out the stains of racism from our national character. But, with trust in God, who blesses His people with wisdom and courage, we must resolve to follow the Lord Jesus, who, living during a pandemic of sin, nonetheless, *anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, went about doing good and healing those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him* [Acts of the Apostles 10:38]. We have also been anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, the power of faith in Christ. With confidence in God's grace, we can endure the physical evil of a terrible disease and make genuine progress in erasing, as far as possible, the moral evil of racism. *With God all things are possible* [Matthew 19:26].

Yours in Christ,

*+ Mark E. Brennan*

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