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A Pastoral Letter to the People of the Diocese - June 8, 2020

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Peace and grace of our loving God be with you!

These past few months have been difficult for all of us. I share your heartache that we have not been able to gather for Sunday Eucharist. The recent approval to come together for weekday Eucharistic celebration limited to 15 people is only marginally helpful. I want you to know I have laboured hard to seek agreement to re-open our churches for fuller participation especially on Sundays.

Over the past month and a half, I have communicated with the Chief Public Health Officer and/or her deputy, as well as writing to the Premier. I have prepared a detailed Safety Protocol to ensure that we could come together in a safe manner. I have advocated that we be allowed to gather for Sunday worship up to a maximum of 30% capacity of our churches. Unfortunately, despite the Public Health Office acknowledging that our Protocol was the “most rigorous” of those received, the dialogue with the province has not been fruitful. Public Health Officials seem determined to impose a fixed number (50) as an upper limit in Phase 4. For small churches fifty in attendance may be adequate but not for larger churches such as St. Mary’s, Souris, St. Simon and Jude, Tignish, St. Paul’s, Summerside and all the churches in Charlottetown.

My experience in trying to present a realistic approach to Sunday worship, during the “new normal”, leads me to question just how important a person’s faith is seen by the government officials. Is it as important as economic opportunity i.e. re-opening restaurants? Is it as important as re-opening sporting activities and barber shops? Is it as important as opening our borders to seasonal dwellers?

The truth is, as you know, that our faith and the ability to actively celebrate it has significant implications for emotional and psychological well-being. Stated simply celebrating faith together has health benefits! Mandating that faith communities gather in relatively small numbers is divisive. That is, it divides a community, forcing the doors of the church to be closed to many more than are able to enter. This does not strike me as just or reasonable.

If assemblies of worship are able to adhere to Health directives (of sanitizing, social distancing, no clustering of people coming and going, and minimizing any physical contact in receiving Communion etc.) why is it untenable that faith communities be able to function in numbers that are communally acceptable? I am confident that parishes can meet the health standards with 30% in attendance; and all the while collecting personal data from participants to facilitate effective tracking and tracing.

I want to assert that faith communities have a right to function, and to function well. I want to protect our people and keep them safe as much as the Public Health Officials. Yet I believe that the Province of Prince Edward Island, given its unique situation in controlling Covid-19, needs to be more open and understanding of faith communities of all types who long to gather for worship in their churches.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Bishop Richard Grecco