

DIOCESE OF HARRISBURG  
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP



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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Undoubtedly, during these days you have heard someone reference the opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way." Not only one of literature's oft-quoted passages, these words speak something of the human experience in every age when struck by "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way (*Gaudium et spes*, 1)."

These are days which test us in many ways. Such tests often bring out the best and worst in us. They stretch us to our limits, not to break but to expand our capacity to love, hope, and believe. And, there is much good to acknowledge and celebrate. We can see in ourselves and in those around us the best of human care and concern, a flourishing of prayer and deepening of the spiritual life, as well as many other signs of wisdom and light to brighten our day. Together, we struggle to fight against the despair and darkness that come with a sense of helplessness and frustration. Here, the fight itself manifests the "best in us" as we claim our call to live as "children of the light and of the day (1 Thess 5:5)."

As the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania begins the slow and arduous transitioning toward the next phase of this crisis, we, too, as the Church in southcentral Pennsylvania begin to chart our path forward. Directives have been given to our parishes for the possibilities available to them in this next step. Some may judge these to be overly cautious. However, they are prudent and careful steps toward the restoration of public worship. In compliance with the directives of the Governor and the Department of Health, each parish will begin to move forward. This transition will require time and patience.

We must all consider the demands of charity and justice. The commandment of charity, to love, is at the heart of Christian life. The virtue of charity creates within us a selfless and other-focused love that begins with God and extends to our neighbors. The closing of the churches and their slow reopening is not an expression of fear but charity and concern for the well-being of the many who gather in our sacred spaces. We are responsible for one another, our "brother's keeper," as Genesis (4:9) reminds us. Our rights and desires are never to be exercised at the price of another's safety. The law of charity must prevail and the current crisis provides a rich opportunity to demonstrate this.

To that end, out of charity and justice to our neighbors, I ask that as our parish churches reopen and transition to public worship in this Yellow Phase, parishioners attend their own parish churches and respect the stay-at-home order for those who remain in the Red Phase according to the designation by the State Government. Not only does this prevent the comingling of persons outside each county, it allows fair access to their parish churches. As this restoration spreads throughout the Diocese of Harrisburg, each parishioner will have his or her opportunity to return.

I am aware of the sacrifices you have made throughout this quarantine, not only in the practice of your faith life, but also in your families and communities. This instruction is not intended to add to your burdens. Please know that, along with all the clergy, I am eager to return to some normalcy in our liturgical and sacramental lives. As grateful as I have been to celebrate each Sunday with so many of you from our Cathedral broadcast, it is heartbreaking to process to the altar through an empty church. This was especially so during Holy Week. Yet, these sacrifices are offered in charity because our respect for the dignity of every human life needs to be grounded in our practical actions.

Each parish will be formulating a plan for the gradual restoration of public worship. Your pastor has been asked to work with pastoral staff and parish lay leadership to develop a plan that is prudent and fitting for each circumstance. If you have any expertise that could help in this task, please contact your pastor and offer your wisdom and experience.

As we have entrusted ourselves once more to the Blessed Mother on the first day of this month, I invoke once more her protection and intercession upon all of God's People here in the Diocese of Harrisburg. May she keep us from danger, teach us the path of virtue, and lead us closer to her Son.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "R. Ronald W. Gainer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Reverend Ronald W. Gainer