



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

## DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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### **Pastoral Letter at the end of the Easter Season, 2021**

Dear clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese,

#### **1. The COVID-19 Pandemic**

As we approach the end of the Easter season with the solemnity of Pentecost on May 23, I am pleased to share with you the good news that our recently revised norms for parish life, effective as of May 1, should help our parishes resume those social gatherings, such as coffee and donuts after Mass, funeral lunches and spaghetti dinners, that the pandemic obliged us to suspend for over a year. The revised norms are available on the diocesan website.

We still have to observe safety measures at these parish gatherings, but aren't those measures comparable to insect repellent we put on our arms and other exposed skin so we can enjoy the outdoors? We put up with a little annoyance for the greater benefit of spending time with our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Regarding Masses and other liturgical events (baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals, etc.), we still must follow the safety measures that have worked so well for us for almost a year: washing our hands, physical distancing by households, sanitizing our churches (less often, based on the latest guidelines from the Center for Disease Control). I applaud all of you for your cooperation in these matters, that have enabled us to gather safely for Mass for the past year.

With respect to wearing masks at Mass and other liturgical celebrations, we have always respected our Governor's mandates, never doing less than he required. He has now stated publicly that on June 20, West Virginia Day, the mask-wearing mandate will be lifted for indoor events, assuming the state is at or close to having 65% of its inhabitants vaccinated. The Diocese will monitor this situation closely. If we decide it is safe to forego masks at Mass, we will happily do so; but if the percentage of vaccinated West Virginians is far short of the goal, we will continue to wear masks at Mass so that our people can come together to worship God safely. Since developments are happening fast and furiously, we will base our actions on the most up to date information.

Most of us older folk in West Virginia have been fully vaccinated. We now need the younger generations to step up and do the same. I urge grandparents to encourage your children and grandchildren to be vaccinated. The vaccines are safe and protect not only the one

vaccinated but others with whom he or she comes into contact. This is one way of putting into practice the Lord's commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. Being vaccinated does not deny an individual's freedom, but allows that individual to freely choose to do something to promote the common good. Older folks: please talk to your family members and urge them to cooperate for everyone's good by getting vaccinated.

## **2. Feasts and Liturgical Matters**

The Second Vatican Council taught that the Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." Everything in our life leads up to it and all our power to live in newness of life and to love as Jesus loved flows from it. Why is this so? Because the Eucharist is nothing less than Jesus Christ in person. In a mysterious way that we can describe but not truly explain, he changes bread and wine in their deepest reality into his Body and Blood, so that he can build us up from within. A genuine belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is essential to Catholic faith and to receiving the benefits of our Holy Communion.

The solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, often called by its Latin name, *Corpus Christi*, this year on June 6, is a time to reaffirm our faith in Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. But it should not be limited to Mass. There is a great tradition of public processions in which the Eucharist is carried through the streets on *Corpus Christi* Sunday, letting us Catholics show our friends and neighbors, whether Catholic or not, that we joyfully proclaim our faith in the Eucharistic Lord. I ask the pastor of every parish to organize such a procession, ending, if possible, with Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

This year the Gospel for Ordinary Time is St. Mark. But Mark is a sprinter, not a long-distance runner. St. John fills in for several weeks in the summer, starting July 25, in what is called the Bread of Life Discourse. It is an excellent opportunity to deepen our understanding of the Eucharist as John takes us from seeing Jesus feed thousands with ordinary bread as a sign of his messiahship, to hearing the call to put our faith in Jesus as the new manna sent down from heaven, to grasping that everything about him – his words, his actions, his person – is "bread" for us to feed on, to believing that he, the living bread from heaven, offered his flesh for the life of the world, to recognizing, finally, that Jesus' Body is "true food" and his Blood "true drink," the densest, most concrete presence of him who suffered, died and rose again for our sake. I urge homilists to preach on these Eucharistic themes and the faithful to meditate at Mass and at home on the intense love that moves the Son of God to give himself to us as food for our journey of faith.

On another liturgical matter: does the posture we assume at different moments in the Mass matter? The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)*, which governs the celebration of the Mass, thinks so: "A common posture, to be observed by all the participants, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered for the sacred Liturgy: it both expresses and fosters the intention and spiritual attitude of the participants." Certain postures are seen to be more appropriate than others for particular moments in the Mass: we sit

for the first readings but stand for the Gospel; we kneel from the end of the “Holy, holy” until the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, with its Doxology and Great Amen.

Normative postures are not absolutes and have varied over time. It would be a mistake to equate them in importance with believing that the Scriptures proclaimed at Mass are divinely inspired or that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist. Nonetheless, as the *GIRM* says, common postures express bodily a unity of intention and spiritual attitude that befits the specific liturgical action taking place. I urge all, clergy, religious and lay faithful, to respect the norms for posture during Mass. Kneeling is the appropriate posture for the Eucharistic Prayer, except for circumstances in which it would be unreasonable to insist on it, such as a field Mass with no chairs, a person’s health issue or an overflow congregation in which some persons are obliged to stand.

Standing has for the past fifty years been the normative posture for the reception of Holy Communion in the United States. A common posture at this moment is highly appropriate because the Eucharist manifests and builds up our unity in faith and love. No one should be denied Holy Communion because he or she kneels, but I ask those who prefer kneeling to recognize that they are adopting a private preference at a moment when manifesting with their bodies a common purpose is more appropriate.

A last note on posture: Bishop Bernard Schmitt almost twenty years ago availed himself of the permission, given by Rome to the local bishop, to establish standing as the normative posture after the Lamb of God. The three bishops of Wheeling-Charleston since then, myself included, have not seen fit to change his norm. Our young people have grown up with this practice. Since tourists and neighbors from nearby dioceses, where kneeling after the Lamb of God is the practice, are often at Masses in our Diocese, it is best not to make an issue of this. We welcome them as brothers and sisters. “The law of charity is the highest law.”

### **3. Equality Act**

This bill, passed by the US House of Representatives and now before the US Senate, modifies the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964. It has a wonderful name and purports to prohibit discrimination against gay, Lesbian, transgendered and other persons. The Catholic Church affirms the full human dignity of persons with these sexual orientations and agrees that they must be treated with respect and accorded basic human rights – for example, to employment, housing and jury duty.

If the Equality Act limited itself to these areas, it would probably be seen benignly by many who now oppose it. But the Act goes far beyond these basic protections for gay and Lesbian persons. With regard to transgendered persons, it codifies in federal law a concept of gender identity that is untethered to reality; basically, you are the sex you think you are, regardless of what your body says. Having listened to persons with gender dysphoria, I know they suffer. To honestly believe you are in the wrong body, to hate the shape of your body and the sound of your voice, is a constant source of psychic pain. Such persons deserve compassion and need relief.

However, to insist that a physician, who believes that hormone treatments or surgical interventions are bad medical practice for what is essentially a psychological condition, must nonetheless give those treatments or perform that operation under threat of legal sanctions, is unfair. It is also unfair to insist that teachers and administrators in a school must agree that Joseph is now Josephine and allow the transgendered student full access to activities that are exclusively for girls. But that is what the Equality Act stipulates.

The Act commendably prohibits discrimination in employment against pregnant women. That is good. If a pregnant woman can do her work well, even up to the day before delivery, she should be allowed to. But the Act also prohibits discrimination against those with “pregnancy-related conditions,” language that some federal agencies and courts have interpreted to include abortion and other actions that end or prevent a pregnancy. A Catholic hospital could be forced to perform abortions or face the loss of federal funds. A Jewish nurse could lose her job because she objects to taking part in a sterilization of a young woman.

Finally, the Equality Act explicitly exempts itself from any appeal based on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 to any of the Equality Act’s provisions. No conscientious objection based on religious belief could be lodged by a person faced with doing something he or she considers morally wrong. How consistent is that in a nation that grants conscientious objector status to citizens because they object to fighting in a war?

I ask you to contact our two United States Senators, the Honorable Joseph Manchin and the Honorable Shelley Moore Capito, and urge them to vote against the Equality Act when it comes before the Senate. Tweaking it will not work. It must simply be defeated – and then a bill dealing with genuine discrimination issues could be crafted. Americans are generally fair-minded. We Catholics have the added motivation from our faith to treat our neighbor as we would want to be treated. Respecting people is necessary but agreeing with everyone’s interpretation of reality is not. We who have profound problems with the Equality Act also deserve respect and a serious consideration of our views. I hope my observations on this subject are of some help to you.

Thank you for reading a very long letter which treats some very important subjects. May God bless you, your families and parishes and our great Mountain State.

Sincerely in Christ,



+Mark E. Brennan

Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston