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Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

We have lived through an extraordinary year filled with personal challenges, fears, and sufferings caused by the pandemic. At the same time, we have been encouraged by the heroism of health care workers and first responders, the creativity of our pastors, and the kindness of neighbors and friends who by their love and service peeled back the darkness which at times threatened to overwhelm us.

Now that there are clear signs the pandemic is loosening its grip on our lives, we come to you with confidence to take the next step in reestablishing our ecclesial life as a community of faith.

You may recall that when COVID-19 first appeared in our state last March, we, the Latin Rite Catholic Bishops of Connecticut, adopted a series of changes to the celebration of Mass designed to protect those who attended from the possible spread of the virus. However, it quickly became evident that those measures were insufficient to protect our people. After consultation and prayer, it was with a heavy heart that we took the extraordinary step of granting a dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation in each of our respective dioceses. The intent behind that decision was to protect human life, especially the frailest and most vulnerable in our midst from becoming infected by a disease which many doctors were unsure how best to combat. We wish to express our sincere gratitude for your cooperation in observing the safety protocols that resulted in no significant viral spread of COVID-19 at any celebration of Mass in our dioceses.

Thankfully, the situation surrounding the pandemic is slowly improving in our state. For example, vaccinations are increasing, and hospitalizations are decreasing throughout the state. The recent decision by Governor Lamont to limit indoor restrictions on public assembly only to the mandatory wearing of masks marks a watershed moment in our year-long struggle against the COVID-19 virus.

In light of these positive developments, we believe the time has come to review the importance that full participation at Mass has for the spiritual life of all believers and offer a heartfelt appeal for all Catholics to return to the Sunday celebration of Mass in person.

Our Catholic faith teaches us the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the sacramental celebration in which the Mystery of Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection becomes present to us through grace. In other words, Christ's sacrifice on the cross at Calvary, which was offered once for all and atones

for the sins of the whole world, is made present to us during the Mass. Personal participation at Mass invites us into the mystery of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

Everything that takes place during the Mass offers us a personal encounter with the Crucified and Risen Christ. We hear him speak to us in his Word, reminding us of the Gospel message and the mandate to proclaim it. We see Christ living among the community of the faithful, where He hears our prayers and encourages us in our daily lives. We experience the Lord in the person of the priest, who preaches the Word and offers the Eucharist in which our Lord becomes sacramentally present to us. Most especially, we encounter the Lord profoundly through the reception of Holy Communion since it is the crucified and Risen Christ himself we receive.

These moments of our encounter with the Lord during Mass offer us a deeply personal opportunity for spiritual nourishment. By receiving Christ's Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in the Eucharist, the Lord's grace strengthens the daily life we share with him through our personal prayer and works of charity. Holy Communion is the celestial food that enlightens our minds, gives comfort to our hearts, and strengthens our wills to live the Church's mission in word, deeds and manner of life.

Furthermore, when we gather as a community at Sunday Mass, we do so as members of Christ's Mystical Body. Just as the Lord gathered with his apostles in the Upper Room on the night before he died, in part to strengthen the bonds of love they shared in light of the challenges they would later face in their ministry, so too we gather as members of Christ's Mystical Body. In imitation of the Lord's example, we strengthen our bonds of unity and renew our shared mission to bring Christ's message of redemption, forgiveness, and hope to our troubled world.

In a world that has relied upon technology to keep people united in times of profound isolation, some may question the need to attend Sunday Mass in person. To answer this question, we can never forget that while Christian discipleship involves a deeply personal relationship with the Lord, it is never a wholly private one. At our baptism, each of us received the Spirit of adoption, transforming us into Temples of the Holy Spirit and members of the one Mystical Body of Christ. The pursuit of holiness in our personal lives requires that we come together as a community of faith so that the Lord can bless, unite, and strengthen our shared hopes, dreams, challenges, and sufferings in service to Him.

This communal transformation occurs uniquely during the celebration of Mass. "In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value."¹

We are grateful for all those who joined us and our priests for online Mass during the pandemic, and we look forward to welcoming you back in person. At the same time, we encourage our pastors to continue to live stream the celebration of Sunday Mass for the sake of those who legitimately cannot attend Mass in person.

¹ CCC 1368.

From apostolic times, the community of believers felt a deep desire to gather in-person to celebrate the Lord's Death and Resurrection on Sunday, the eighth day of re-creation and the first day of the week.² The current law of the Church has codified this ancient, ecclesial practice in the following manner:

Sunday, on which by apostolic tradition the paschal mystery is celebrated, must be observed in the universal Church as the primordial holy day of obligation [...] On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass. Moreover, they are to abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord's day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body.³

However, the obligation to gather in person and attend Sunday Mass should never be understood simply as an observance of a legal requirement. Instead, it is the Church's expression of the deep, personal desire that burns in our hearts to come into the presence of the Lord whom we love, who gave His life for our salvation so that we may receive Him as food for our life's journey unto eternal glory.⁴ For who among us does not want to spend time with someone we deeply love? How much have our hearts ached this past year isolated and separated from our family and friends? In those moments, were our hearts not burning with a deep longing to see them again face to face? We did not need anyone to tell us we were obliged to seek them, for our love sought them. Similarly, it must be our deep love for Christ that invites us to seek Him in person and by attending Mass, to welcome Him intimately into our lives as food for the journey of life.

Given the reality that the pandemic has not completely subsided, we recognize that some persons may deeply desire to return to Mass in person but are prevented from doing so for legitimate reasons. These reasons include: (1) suffering from serious pre-existing conditions that may make a person more susceptible to falling ill from COVID-19; (2) being ill and homebound or being a caregiver in close contact with someone who is; (3) having tested positive for any contagious disease, including COVID-19; (4) being in quarantine due to exposure to any contagion or residing with someone who is quarantined. For anyone facing these circumstances, please remember that the Lord will never invite you to do something that poses a danger to oneself or others.

²"By a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every eighth day; with good reason this, then, bears the name of the Lord's day or Sunday. For on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place so that, by hearing the word of God and taking part in the Eucharist, they may call to mind the passion, the resurrection and the glorification of the Lord Jesus, and may thank God who "has begotten them again, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto a living hope" (1 Pet. 1:3); THE SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Constitution «On the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum concilium*», 106.

³PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE AUTHENTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE CODE OF CANON LAW, *The Code of Canon Law*, ns. 1246-1247.

⁴"Yet more than as a precept, the observance should be seen as a need rising from the depths of Christian life. It is crucially important that all the faithful should be convinced that they cannot live their faith or share fully in the life of the Christian community unless they take part regularly in the Sunday Eucharistic assembly. The Eucharist is the full realization of the worship which humanity owes to God, and it cannot be compared to any other religious experience", JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter «On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy *Dies Domini*», 81.

Furthermore, considering the fact that COVID-19 vaccines are highly effective and that the Church has determined that moral questions regarding their development do not preclude their use, we encourage people very strongly to receive the vaccine for their own safety, for the safety of their family and their communities, and the common good, because the larger proportion of people who get vaccinated, the more quickly will the pandemic subside.

In light of these reflections and with confidence in the Lord’s grace and protection, we have decided to end the general dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation in person in each of our respective dioceses effective Saturday, May 22, 2021, beginning with the Vigil Mass of the Solemnity of Pentecost.

As we take this hopeful step in our recovery from the pandemic, let us pray that the Lord Jesus, in his great mercy, will deepen our appreciation, love, and participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. For with our hearts and minds renewed, we will be ready to go out into the world and courageously proclaim the saving message of the Gospel by our words and witness of life.

In the light of Easter joy and with every best wish, we remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,



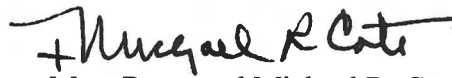
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Most Reverend Frank J. Caggiano
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Most Reverend Juan Miguel Betancourt, SEMV
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Most Reverend Michael R. Cote
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