**Message of the Most Reverend Oscar A. Solis**

**Bishop of the Diocese of Salt Lake City, Utah**

To the People of God in Utah,

Greetings of God’s peace and love!

You must have by now learned about the decision I prayerfully made for the Diocese of Salt Lake City regarding the outbreak of the coronavirus. The World Health Organization has called it a pandemic. President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, and Governor Gary Herbert and the local government in Utah have made us aware of this growing crisis in our state.

In view of this, I have implemented emergency measures in response, to help address this serious situation. These include temporarily suspending the public celebration of worship, including Holy Mass, other diocesan and parish events such as the Lenten retreat that involve the presence of many people, as well as classes in our Catholic schools. In this regard, I am issuing for Catholics a dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday, and teachers in our Catholic schools will provide their students remote instruction rather than onsite. These measures will remain in effect until March 31, or until further notice.

This was a very difficult decision, and I made it with a heavy heart. My decision, in consultation with other diocesan leaders, is to heed the warning of the authorities in an effort to help prevent the further spread of the coronavirus disease, to safeguard the health of those who are more vulnerable, and for the greater good of the community. Today it is not just a matter of containing the disease, but we must also consider the greater possibility of endangering the lives of many others. It is perhaps a superabundance of caution, but by virtue of the serious circumstances, I find it prudent to act immediately.

I know how painful it is for us to be deprived of public worship, especially of the Holy Eucharist, but this is a time when we Catholics must look beyond ourselves. I ask for your understanding and for you to broaden your perspective of the whole issue. It is more than “me” individually, but “us” as a community. We Catholics are a minority here in Utah, yet a big part of it. Our government authorities have asked the various sectors of our society for our cooperation to help to address this crisis. We must do our part.

In our little and humble way, we can contribute to helping during this time of crisis as Catholics, by temporarily depriving ourselves of the Holy Mass, the summit of our Christian life and worship, for the sake of others and the greater good of our community, especially those who are vulnerable to the disease – the elderly and the sick. And let us do it in a spirit of sacrifice and charity.

The Book of Psalms reminds us to “hope in the Lord, trust in His word, for with Him there is kindness and plenteous of redemption.” During these trying times, please continue to pray and practice our faith. We worship as a community, and the gift of the grace of faith given by the Holy Spirit grows in the community as well as in us individually. While we cannot gather together in a worship space, we can still partake of a spiritual communion by watching the celebration of the Holy Mass on television or on social media, through our diocesan website or on YouTube.

Our churches remain open for your personal visits and prayers before the Blessed Sacrament. You can also pray individually or as a family at home. In a special way, let us seek the grace and mercy of God by making use of the Holy Bible, and spiritual and inspirational books, as well as pious devotions such as the rosary, Stations of the Cross and novenas. Pray for one another, especially those who are affected by the coronavirus, as well as their caretakers and health care workers, the sick and our families suffering the effects of this crisis.

I encourage you to create an environment of dialogue with our Lord. Perhaps this is a time God has given us to sit down, to reflect, to pray and establish a deeper communion with the Lord. Perhaps this is a time also to establish closer relationships with your spouse, children and friends. Oftentimes, we get so distracted by the many other preoccupations in life that we lose sight of God and neglect the people we love around us.

My dear friends, dispel your fears and never lose hope, because God is still with us. Although we do not at this time publicly celebrate the Mass, we can still encounter Christ in our lives. Let us invoke God’s grace of strength and courage as one faith family, so we can withstand our trials and difficulties. Following the example of our forbearers in faith, let us seek together the maternal intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe, that our trust in God’s power and through the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, help us end this pandemic and grant us His salvation.

+The Most Rev. Oscar A. Solis

Bishop of Salt Lake City

**A PRAYER FOR PROTECTION IN TIME OF PANDEMIC**

*(Pope Francis)*

*O Mary, you always shine on our path
as a sign of salvation and of hope.
We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick,*

*who at the cross took part in Jesus' pain,*

*keeping your faith firm.
You know what we need, and we are sure you will provide
so that, as in Cana of Galilee,
we may return to joy and to feasting after this time of trial.
Help us, Mother of Divine Love,
to conform to the will of the Father
and to do as we are told by Jesus,
who has taken upon himself our sufferings
and carried our sorrows
to lead us, through the cross,
and to the joy of the resurrection.*

*Under your protection,*

*we seek refuge, Holy Mother of God.*

*O glorious and blessed Virgin,*

*Do not disdain the entreaties of we who are in trial,*

*but deliver us from every danger. Amen*