



His Excellency
STEVEN JOHN RAICA
By the grace of God and the Apostolic See
Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama

**DECREE
EXTENDING THE DISPENSATION
FROM THE SUNDAY AND HOLY DAY MASS OBLIGATION
DUE TO COVID-19**

In accordance with canons 87 § 1 and 90 of the Code of Canon Law, I make the following provision, recognizing that infection rates for COVID-19 remain generally high in the territory of the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama and that the dispensation I previously extended on August 19, 2020 shall soon expire, on November 22, 2020:

I hereby extend the dispensation from the obligation to assist at Holy Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation through Sunday, January 10, 2021 (inclusive) – the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord and the conclusion of the Christmas Season – for all the Roman Catholic faithful who reside in the Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama.

This dispensation was originally granted in a more limited form (only dispensing some) on March 13, 2020 by my predecessor, Bishop Robert J. Baker. On May 13, 2020, upon the resumption of public worship, he amplified it to dispense all. Since then, it has been extended various times, down to this current extension. It is important to note that a general dispensation lasting so many months is virtually unheard-of in the history of the Church. The Church has seen many pandemics, as well countless other calamities in different parts of the world during different epochs of history; never have we approached them quite in this way.

To be sure, each day, we take any number of risks. To live is to take risks! We all face the certain prospect of death, and as our Lord reminded us in the gospel last Sunday (November 8), we “know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 24:36). As St. Paul taught us this Sunday, “the Lord will come like a thief at night” (I Th 5:2). Therefore, each day, we face the very real prospect of its being our last; nevertheless, we take so many risks along the way. We get in our cars and navigate crowded roads; we go to public places where disease can spread; we eat food grown, harvested, and/or prepared by others – sometimes sitting down for an hour or more in a restaurant; we know not if we will be injured; we know not whether there will be some international catastrophe. We live through major weather events, wars, droughts – and indeed, through epidemics and pandemics.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic no one knew what to expect: the disease was far more mysterious than it is now. Over the past months, however, we have learned a great deal. So much important research has been done – even here in our diocese, at places like UAB. Indeed, many of the skilled researchers and physicians are Catholic, a true credit to our religion’s emphasis on the relationship between faith and science. As a result, there are now more effective therapeutic treatments available that benefit many. The science is developing with newer understandings every day. And we know what reasonable precautions we may take to mitigate and manage the risk (especially observing the indications urged by local, state, and federal health authorities, including, but not limited to, the wearing of face masks, social distancing, frequent washing of hands, and sanitizing hard surfaces). Just as people wear seatbelts, buy term life insurance, and take seasonal precautions (especially during flu season), so, too, we know the ways that we may generally avoid contracting COVID-19. Yes, while we can never fully avoid the risks, we can at least manage them intelligently.

Now it must be said that we know this disease can be deadly for some: we mourn and commend to God’s mercy all those who have died from COVID-19; we know their number has not been insignificant. Those with certain underlying medical conditions, who are of more advanced age, who are in other higher-risk categories, or who live with and/or care for someone of the foregoing groups, must exercise greater vigilance and take additional precautions – to include, in some cases, not leaving their homes. We pray that effective vaccines and additional treatments will be available soon, so that they, also, can resume a more “normal” rhythm of life.

With all of that having been said, it is important also to note that those who are in high-risk circumstances ordinarily do not need a dispensation from a bishop or a pastor, for they are dispensed by the moral law itself. It is of value for us to review the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, number 2181, which teaches us that “the Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, *unless excused for a serious reason* (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.” (Emphasis added.) Being in a high-risk category for COVID-19, or other circumstances connected with it, such as having been exposed to contagion or actually having symptoms of a contagious illness, are legitimate reasons to miss Sunday Mass without incurring sin. Indeed, it would be a sinful lack of charity for one who is sick not to stay away from Mass and other public gatherings. Those who legitimately and physically cannot participate in person, are urged to participate through social media and make a spiritual communion. More and more pastors are streaming Masses from our local parishes. Or, alternatively, Masses are available through cable, on satellite networks, or on EWTN or other Catholic channels.

Therefore, as your Bishop, tasked as I am with the care of your souls and conscious of the account that I will someday render to God when death comes for me, also, I take this opportunity to remind you of the Church’s teaching on the Sunday obligation. Though I am extending the dispensation now, *there will arrive a day when the special dispensation will not be extended further*. We each have the opportunity during this present extension to assess the risks we are already taking and, if we have not yet returned to Mass (even with precautions), ask ourselves, before God, if our reasons for missing are truly legitimate. We hoped that COVID-19 would have been a footnote in history by now; alas, it is still with us. Therefore, as faithful Catholics, drawing upon the riches of our great tradition, *let us find the way forward **with and through** COVID-19*, rather than living in fear of it – or even worse, rather than putting life on hold.

With the foregoing in mind, I am convoking a “Year of the Parish and the Eucharist”, starting with the First Sunday of Advent – November 29, 2020. Various Chancery offices will, in due course, publish resources for parishes and other ministries, to aid pastors and leaders of ministries in how they may observe this important year. Amidst the disorientation, distress, and uncertainty, we need to re-discover the value of *being together with the Lord*, our sure hope. Like the early Christians, we say: “*Sine dominico non possumus*” (cf. Martyrs of Abitinae) – “We cannot live without the Lord’s day”. In a time when so many Catholics no longer appreciate the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist, as evidenced by recent well-publicized polls and studies, we endeavor to encounter Christ anew in this great gift that he left us, which is celebrated in the Christian assembly. “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gn 2:18), God said. We are made for community – and we Catholics recognize that our community should be united in the worship of God. This special year will be a time of grace and many blessings for us all.


Allow me to say, in conclusion, that I am so appreciative of our priests, deacons, and religious, as well as their faithful lay collaborators, many of whom have been heroic and creative in serving you during our present distress. I know they will embrace this special year that is upon us, and that the Lord will give us many blessings through them. I became your bishop in the middle of this pandemic, so I have not been able to meet as many of you as I would have liked. Still, many of you have sent me your prayer intentions or other correspondence, and in earnest, I have been making the rounds and visiting as many of you as possible. Thank you for your support and your prayers – both for your pastors and other leaders, and for me!

May Our Lady, Virgin Most Prudent, Health of the Sick, and Cause of Our Joy, pray for us and guide us to a deeper encounter with her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the one Savior of the human race, to whom we owe our existence and all praise. Know of my continued prayers for you and your loved ones. I thank you for your kind attention to this decree and letter. God bless and keep you all.

Given at the Diocesan Chancery in Birmingham on the 17th of November, the Memorial of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary, in the Year of the Lord 2020.



Most Reverend Steven J. Raica
Bishop of Birmingham in Alabama



Very Reverend Bryan W. Jerabek
Chancellor