



Dear Dr. Park,

I write to you to express our great concern on the recent restrictions placed on indoor worship services effective Tuesday, November 17, 2020.

In the many months since we were first challenged by Covid-19 we have been acutely aware of its dreadful consequences for people and of the difficult dilemmas that the state and county have had to negotiate. Our thoughts and prayers have been with all our government leaders, civil servants, health care workers, and especially with those who have died, and are grieving, or severely impacted and stressed by the virus and its consequences.

Our counties are facing tremendous challenges with the pandemic at this moment and so the reasons behind the State's decision to bring in more restrictive measures is understandable. However, we strongly disagree with the decision to suspend indoor public worship at this time. Faith plays a critical role in moments of immense crisis, and we believe public worship is essential.

With the shift of the county to the Covid-19 purple tier we now face the reality that we are unable to worship together indoors. When indoor worship was prohibited earlier this summer, we made the shift to outdoor services. But now the change in the weather makes this a much more difficult prospect, especially in the light of our experiences described below.

Unlike the first closure, where there was much that was unclear about the spread of the virus, we now know that public worship can take place safely, even indoors. For months our parish communities have been worshipping indoors following rigorous Covid-19 protocols. Capacity in our churches is limited and seating is appropriately spaced, attendees have their temperature taken before entering the building and are registered to allow for contact tracing if necessary, the wearing of masks is mandatory, and the church building is sanitized between services. To date we have experienced no outbreaks attributed to church attendance.

I wish to cite an article by three medical professionals who helped to craft suggested nationwide guidelines for Catholic worship during COVID-19: "For Catholic churches following these guidelines, no outbreaks of COVID-19 have been linked to church attendance, even though we have examples...of asymptomatic, unknowingly infected individuals attending mass and other parish functions."¹ The authors estimate that in the 14 weeks before the article was written, over one million public masses had been celebrated throughout the county, following the appropriate guidelines. Since then, there have certainly been many more, and we have not heard of a single outbreak linked to a service where proper precautions were being followed.

This claim is supported by our own local experience, where we had some cases of asymptomatic individuals who had attended Mass during June and early July, and subsequently tested positive for COVID. In each case, the congregations were notified in accordance with our guidelines and no outbreaks resulted.

Our churches have put a great deal of work into crafting protocols and procedures which follow the state's guidelines so as to create a safe space for worship. We have been working closely with our Catholic schools, monitoring their protocols and related successes. To date, with preschools through high school on campus, there have only been 9 student and 4 staff positive cases reported and no known school transmission. We believe we

¹ https://www.realclearscience.com/articles/2020/08/19/evidence-based_guidelines_to_celebrate_mass_safely_are_working.html

have and can experience equal success. If we did not believe indoor public worship could be done safely, we would not have resumed in-person worship even when permitted under the state guidelines.

From the time of resumption of public worship, the state has said that its guidelines would be subject to regular review "to assess the impact of these imposed limits on public health and provide further direction."² We believe the experience of our churches, who have closely followed the state and county directives, calls for such a review. That review would be very welcome because the current limitations of communal worship is detrimental to the practice of our faith. If indoor public worship can be practiced safely (and we believe that it can) it has an overriding value for us.

Catholic worship, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist, the Mass, is a communal, corporate act. It requires, by its very nature, an assembly of people. It is only partly a service of the Word: the reading of scripture, a reflection on that word and prayer. But more importantly, it is a gathering of people around the table of the Eucharist, joining in a common prayer of thanksgiving and culminating in the reception of the Eucharist (Holy Communion). Words and reflection and prayer can effectively be shared virtually, the reception of Holy Communion cannot. At a virtual distance it becomes, at best, a reminder of what separates us.

It is at that service of word and Eucharist that we remember who we are as a community and empowered and sent to live out that corporate reality in service for others, particularly at times of great need, as we presently find ourselves.

Public Worship has important benefits to society, especially during times of crisis. It is in and through our worship that our people are strengthened and are given hope to continue the work they do in supporting the good of our broader community during this pandemic. These people include many in health care, front line workers, volunteers and paid workers involved in social services agencies as well as everyday mothers, fathers and children working to live ordinary lives in these extraordinary days. Public worship is a crucial way to sustain the spiritual, mental and emotional wellbeing of those who attend and interact with those in the wider community. If it is safe, which our experience has shown it to be, then we are only negatively impacting our communities more so by restricting the possibility of indoor worship.

To better inform you of the stringent efforts we have been making in providing safe indoor worship I have also included a copy of our Covid-19 procedures and protocols. Please review and let us know if there is anything else that we might add to these to insure the health of our people.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further when your schedule permits, recognizing this is a time sensitive issue.

In the Peace of Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name "Myron J. Cotta".

Myron J. Cotta
Roman Catholic Bishop of Stockton

² COVID-19 Industry Guidance: Places of Worship and Providers of Religious Services and Cultural Ceremonies