

'God has our back,' Archbishop Smith tells the fearful faithful

Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith is calling on Catholics to be resolute in their faith as bishops in Alberta and Northwest Territories suspend masses indefinitely and the Alberta government declares a provincewide state of emergency to slow the spread of COVID-19.

"I'm not aware of anything of this magnitude in this Archdiocese," Smith said told reporters at a March 17 news conference. "With respect to our churches this would be an absolute first."

"When people are afraid and anxious, this is when I would invite them to remember that we are a people of faith," Archbishop Smith said. "We recognize that God has our back, God does not let us down and He's never aloof. Trust that God is drawing close to us – that's the reason for our hope."

As of March 17, there were 97 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Alberta. The virus has caused a worldwide pandemic with more than 447 cases in Canada and more than 190,000 worldwide.

Archbishop Smith's news conference with reporters came a day after Masses were suspended throughout Alberta and the Northwest Territories. Starting March 22, Mass will be livestreamed from St. Joseph's Basilica every Sunday. It can be viewed on the Edmonton Archdiocese website. Archbishop Smith will be the celebrant. The church itself will be empty.

Decisions about masses during Holy Week and Easter will be made at a later date.

"Holy Week is the high point of the liturgical year for Christians. It doesn't get any more important than that," said Smith.

"Given what we're hearing about the anticipated length of this pandemic, we will still be very much dealing with this pandemic during Holy Week. The bishops want to wait a little more, to ensure any decisions we make will be based on the latest up-to-date information from health care professionals."

Archbishop Smith himself tested negative for COVID-19 after self-isolating for four days.

Under the provincial state of emergency, Premier Jason Kenney implemented further aggressive measures to contain the COVID-19 virus. Attendance is banned in bars, recreational centres, museums and other non-essential public places. Restaurants can serve only 50 per cent of their capacity and at most 50 people.

The Alberta government also announced \$60 million for charities and non-profit organizations, and further economic measures will be announced in the next few days.

“The situation is very serious,” Kenney said. “I recognize that these measures will have a profound impact on the lives of Albertans, but they are frankly necessary in face of this pandemic. Decisive action is needed and we are taking that action.”

Gatherings of more than 50 people have also been banned in the province. However, the work of religious soup kitchens, such as the Marian Centre in downtown Edmonton, are exempt and can continue their work.

“Charities, non-profits and religious organizations that operate things like soup kitchens can continue to offer their support to the least fortunate,” Kenney said. “I’m certain pastors, clerics and volunteers will be increasing their visits to the ill and the elderly in particular, who may be in greater need of spiritual support.”

Archbishop Smith said there is no doubt the Church may suffer financially during this pandemic given that masses are suspended. However, he believes parishioners will find alternative ways to support their parish. There is a donate button available on the archdiocese’s website, as well as on other parish sites.

“I expect people will recognize that their parish – their faith home – needs their financial support and will find ways to make that happen,” Smith said.

The decision to suspend public celebrations of the Mass was not made lightly, he said.

“This is especially painful for us. The Eucharist is central to our faith and our identity. We live for the Mass and we live from the Mass. But this is a public health imperative, and therefore we need to do it.

“We need to take this as a sacrifice, and I’m asking people to take this pain and make this an offering to God for others, particularly those who are ill from the COVID-19 virus,” Archbishop Smith said.

Churches in Alberta and the Northwest Territories will remain open during the day to ensure people can come for personal prayer, adoration and confession. The use of confessionals is prohibited, but reconciliation chapels may still be used to provide proper distance between priest and penitent.

Funerals can be celebrated in churches of the Edmonton Archdiocese, but with limited participation that must be decided by the presiding priest and the family of the deceased. Archbishop Smith hopes there will be no further restrictions required on the province’s churches, but the suspension of church

funerals is possible if the pandemic worsens.

“I pray this is the most we will have to do,” said Smith. “But the directives we give to our people will always come from the advice we receive from the chief medical officer. Our first priority always has to be the spiritual, mental, physical and psychological health of our people.”

Archbishop Smith has directed priests in the Edmonton Archdiocese to adhere to all risk mitigation procedures when ministering the sacraments to those afflicted with COVID-19 or other illnesses, or to people in self-isolation.

“If they are called to a situation like this, I have told our priests to follow whatever health and distancing procedures are required, and to not leave our people abandoned,” Smith said.

A variety of measures to combat the spread of coronavirus have been taken by dioceses across Canada. Dioceses in Ontario have suspended all public masses and numerous Catholic events, although a decision regarding masses during Holy Week and Easter has not been determined. Masses continue in the Archdiocese of Vancouver, but have been limited to no more than 50 attendees. The dioceses of Quebec have suspended all masses and announced on March 17 that church funerals will also be suspended.