



## DIOCESE OF METUCHEN

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

April 29, 2009

Dear Friends in Christ:

As you are probably aware through various news media reports, there is a current health concern in the United States and particularly in the greater New York area, about a recent outbreak of "swine flu." As a result, I received a number of inquiries about options available regarding certain aspects of the Liturgy that might cause health concerns, particularly the Sign of Peace and the Reception of Holy Communion. To address these concerns, I thought it would be beneficial to reiterate the points I made in a previous letter addressing the flu season regarding liturgical praxis during a time of potential contagion.

First and foremost, I would like to emphasize that pastoral practice and common sense should always go together, and this is certainly the case with our celebration of the Eucharist. It goes without saying that if you know you are sick or if there is the danger of your spreading germs, you should take every precaution to prevent this. On the other hand, we should also avoid overreaction and panic since we still do not know what the nature of this particular flu strain will be like. In light of these concerns, then, I would like to remind you of the options that already exist in the hope that this information will be helpful to you.

Regarding the Sign of Peace, while the priest or deacon should never omit the invitation to the Sign of Peace, it is appropriate to smile and bow to one's neighbor instead of extending one's hand if there is a serious concern about contagion. There are already a number of options available to those who receive Holy Communion and I would just like to repeat them. If you know you are sick or if you have concerns about receiving from the chalice, you are not bound to do so. It is an option. (Please remember that it is never an option to dip the host yourself in the chalice for priest, deacon or the faithful). I might add that while receiving on the tongue is always an option to the faithful, one should be sensitive to the fact that the priest or minister must place his/her hand in your mouth, and if you are sick you should be aware of the risk this may cause to your neighbor who will be receiving Communion from that minister's hand as well. Finally, and this once again falls under the rubric of common sense, if you know you are ill—especially with the flu—you are excused from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. This is probably the wisest course of action for all concerned.

As I mentioned above, these are all options that already exist within the Liturgy. I also repeat that, at this time, we should avoid overreacting and we should follow the recommendations of our doctors and other health care professionals. Let us pray, too, that this recent outbreak will be contained and prove uneventful in the weeks ahead.

Sincerely in the Lord,

Most Rev. Paul G. Bootkoski  
Bishop of Metuchen