

*St. Francis of Assisi Parish
Ann Arbor.*

July 10, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I know it has been almost a month since I last wrote to you, but please be assured that you are always in my thoughts and prayers and in a special way when I celebrate Holy Mass. The last few weeks have been heavy ones for our nation as we continue to battle the impact of the Covid-19 Virus and the many social, racial, and economic problems that beset our country. It has been difficult to see our cities and communities torn apart by civil unrest and violence, to hear the stories of the many people who feel undervalued or unappreciated in our society, and the struggle that many have on a daily basis to make ends meet.

I am, by nature, a very optimistic person. I prefer to look forward and take what is the best from the past as we journey into the future. But I have to confess that these last few weeks have been a real challenge for me on many levels. Of course, I am buoyed by your support, prayers and your many expressions of gratitude and appreciation for what my pastoral team and I are able to do.

At our Thursday Mass and Holy Hour on July 9, we acknowledged the anniversary of the Venerable Augustus Tolton, who overcame slavery and racial discrimination, to become the first ordained African-American priest in the USA, and whose cause for sainthood is now in Rome. I find his life story to be so compelling and encouraging and Fr. Tolton to be an appropriate advocate for our prayers at this time in our nation's history.



As many of you know, the Virus and its impact on our lives is without precedent. There is no “*how to*” manual for these times- no plan to fall back on- instead we have had to rely on our common sense and the expertise and sound judgment of people in the know. But finding and identifying these people in a world of competing voices and opinions has been my greatest challenge, not just as pastor, but for my own well-being and that of the priests who live with me.

While I am always delighted to hear from you, you can imagine the range of comments and opinions that are sent to me during any given period. Last week alone, I counted over 70 emails with differing medical advice, comments and opinions and all written out of deep concern. Some were simply news reports, many from online medical journals and websites, and others from a wide variety of political, social and medical commentators across the media and blogosphere.

Yet there was no consistency of thought- no agreed approach as to how to deal with this pandemic. I bet you too have experienced this and at times been left bewildered and confused.

So, can I take this important opportunity to underline that at all times we are taking all necessary and reasonable precautions to make sure that you and all of us here at the parish are safe? Any decision we take here is based on the advice of medical people from our community, instructions from the Diocese and the State and adherence to the advice given by the CDC. Once again, may I briefly outline some of these precautions?

- *Ongoing sign in for weekend Masses through our parish website.*
- *Social distancing in Church and on the parish campus.*
- *Use of hand sanitizer and masks where necessary and appropriate.*
- *Disinfecting the Church and other spaces after all Masses and meetings.*
- *Formulation of detailed plans for ongoing and future ministry such as the re-opening of the Parish School and Religious Education in the Fall.*

Earlier today (Friday) the Ministry Team and I met to discuss plans for the coming months. As always, I am grateful for all the hard and thoughtful work and planning that the various ministries have undertaken as we continue to reopen our community of faith and to serve you. It would be easier to stay closed and to hunker down until there is a vaccine, but that cannot be the chosen course- life must go on, even if we have to adapt and change. So today we agreed that we can restore a few more events to our regular calendar.

SATURDAY CONFESSIONS will resume on Saturday, July 18 at 3:30pm. To facilitate this celebration in a safe manner, confessions will be heard behind a screen in the Gathering Space. Entry and exit will be through the main front doors only. We ask all to follow the instructions given. Please note that Confessions will be heard by one priest only and will end at 4:30pm promptly.

SUNDAY 8:30am MASS Beginning August 2, our 8:30am Sunday Mass will return. Once again, we ask registered parishioners to sign in online. Those who are Ministers of Communion, Ushers and Readers are asked to sign up through the usual channels.

CONFIRMATIONS and FIRST COMMUNIONS In the past few weeks we have celebrated many First Communion and Confirmations at our Masses. So, let me congratulate those who have received these sacraments and their families, and remind all of us that each sacrament is an encounter with Christ, who is also our Divine Physician. We still have a few more to go, but we expect to be completed by the end of July. If you have not yet scheduled your date- please contact the Religious Education Office at ward@stfrancisa2.org or call (734) 476-5640.

BAPTISMS at SFA We have resumed celebrating Baptisms. If you wish to have a child baptized, please contact Fr. John (734) 769-2550 to set the date and/or to register for our next preparation class on August 6 at 7pm. In the meantime, you can always sign into our online **FORMED** program through our parish website and watch the videos entitled “*Reborn: you, your child and the Heart of Baptism.*” This will help you greatly in your understanding of and preparation for your child’s baptism.

NEW CAMERAS Many of you have noticed and commented favorably on our updated online service. I want to express my gratitude to Jim Russo and his team of volunteers who have overseen the changes and helped to live stream our liturgies. Our plan, to move the operating desk for the service, is now underway and will soon be relocated to the back of the Church next to the book rack.

OUTREACH MINISTRY Once again, our parish generosity has shone forth in helping those in need. As you know, the Virus has hit hardest those who were unemployed or lost their jobs, the undocumented in our community, and those with underlying health issues. At our Team meeting today, we were told that with the help of your generosity and the support of grants from other organizations in our region, we have been able to assist those in need with almost \$200,000 worth of aid, not counting our ongoing grocery drives. This, in itself, is a magnificent response and evidence that we as Church play a vital role in the life of our region. Despite what some might say, we are not an optional extra or a *non-essentia*, but living proof that the Gospel is life-giving! So, thank you to all who gave and contributed to these gifts!

DIOCESAN SERVICES APPEAL With the advent of the Virus, we had to defer our annual Diocesan Services Appeal. We have now resumed this appeal. Envelopes and flyers, outlining the work of the Diocese through DSA are available in Church. Please help us reach our goal by contributing to this important appeal. Gifts can be made online at the diocesan website- please remember to designate St. Francis Parish <https://dioceseoflansing.org/DSA>

So, there we are! A few things have returned, and a few things have changed. But what has not changed is the Lord’s steadfast care and concern for all of us. So, let me end by invoking the words of the Deuteronomic Blessing found in the Book of Numbers:

***May the Lord bless you and keep you!
The Lord let his face shine upon you and be gracious to you!
The Lord look upon you kindly and give you peace!***

Fr. James