



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

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September 24, 2020

Dear faithful of the Wheeling-Charleston Diocese,

I write to you again to address matters of common concern. I do so as a brother in Christ who has been given the awesome responsibility to serve as your shepherd here in West Virginia. I have considered these matters in the light of the Gospel of Christ, the teachings of our Church and my experience of forty-four years of pastoral ministry.

1. The Coronavirus pandemic. We are still in the middle of it. West Virginia has seen an upsurge of confirmed cases of the disease recently, so we cannot afford to relax our vigilance. We must persevere in patience, letting God's grace help us lead our lives productively and safely.

Since late May, we have received no reports of COVID-19 virus outbreaks traceable to a public Catholic Mass. I congratulate our parishioners, clergy and their teams for this good result but, please, do not let down your guard. While I advise persons with weakened health to stay home, I do not hesitate to urge healthy parishioners to go to Mass and bring their children, for our safety measures are working. Isn't it inconsistent to go to stores and restaurants but not to Mass, where you are safer than in many of those other venues? Is feeding the stomach more important than feeding the soul? Hearing God's Word together and receiving the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion are fundamental to our Catholic faith. If you're healthy, come to Mass!

Most of our Catholic schools have opened with teachers and students in the classroom and rigorous safety protocols in place. So far it has gone well. A few Catholic schools are teaching virtually, because of conditions in their counties, but, thankfully, our teachers are proficient at doing this. I compliment our Superintendent Mary Ann Deschaine and her staff, the principals, personnel, parents and students of our Catholic schools, for their good spirit and cooperation. We also cooperate with civil officials in this matter, trusting that they are trying their best to deal with a changing landscape.

Most of our children attend public schools. Our parishes are beginning to offer religious education classes again, safely. Consult your parish for precisely how they are doing it. Parents: you are the primary educators of your children. Your parish offers you help but cannot replace you. Lead your children to Jesus!

You should be aware that Catholic Charities and many of our parishes continue to serve people in need, while adopting protective measures for the benefit of the serving and the served. We must not stop reaching out with Christ's love to those who need our help. You should be proud of what your fellow Catholics are doing in this regard. Could you join them?

Let us pray hard for an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and for greater cooperation by our fellow citizens in the public health measures mandated or recommended to us all. I believe we Catholics can be a model for others in our State by showing how responsible people act in a public health crisis.

2. The upcoming elections. I urge you to remember, regardless of your political affiliation and views, that we are first and foremost disciples of Jesus Christ, who gathers us as one in his Catholic Church. While many of our fellow citizens engage in harsh rhetoric and even violence to express their feelings about issues and political leaders, we have to act differently everywhere but especially in Catholic settings. Our parishes, schools and Church groups must be oases of calm in the current political storm. It is simply wrong to despise a brother or sister in the faith because of his or her political views. We must worship, pray and work together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In this light I have told our priests and deacons that they are not to endorse, in homilies, bulletins, social media or by other means, particular candidates or political parties. They can and should strive to shed the light of the Gospel on urgent moral and social issues, for our Catholic tradition has much wisdom to offer in such matters, but our clergy, religious and lay employees should not use their Church positions to advance favored candidates or parties. That is unfair to their fellow Catholics.

All citizens ought to vote. The American bishops have a fine document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, available at the usccb.org website. I encourage you to read it, especially parts one and two. It says: "As citizens, we should be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group." Conscience is different from feelings and from mere opinion, whether popular or not. We Catholics have the benefit of centuries

of reflection on moral and political questions, a reflection grounded in both reason and divine revelation. We should evaluate candidates according to whether or not they stand for the *inviolable dignity of the human person*, the *common good* and the principles of *subsidiarity* (such as respect for the family as the basic social unit) and *solidarity* (in particular with the poor and oppressed). Not all issues are of equal weight. The bishops' document explains and applies appropriately these fundamental moral principles. A well-formed conscience should accompany us into the voting booth or when filling out an absentee ballot.

3. The Bransfield Saga. The reaction of our people to the Holy See's decision on the amends Bishop Bransfield should make for some of the harm he caused, has been mixed. Some are tired of the whole affair and want to move on. Others think the former bishop got off much too lightly. For my part, I found his apology self-serving and lacking in any recognition of, or contrition for, actually having offended people. I had it published without alteration and without comment, trusting that our people would see it for the non-apology that it was, and they did. I wasn't here to experience what you did but I deeply regret the pain that such a scandal and betrayal caused you. I can only try, as long as I am here, to be faithful and show that I care for you.

As for those who think the former bishop should go to jail, only the civil authorities can charge a person with a crime or send him to jail; the Church can do neither. (To be clear, the Diocese cooperates with civil authorities who are investigating alleged illegal behavior.) If we filed a lawsuit to recover more money from the former bishop, it is highly likely we would lose. Owing to constitutional concerns over the First Amendment's guarantee of a free exercise of religion, civil courts are very reluctant to interfere in the internal organization and norms of religious bodies, and canon law gives the bishop great control over how diocesan funds are spent. Those who dislike referring to my predecessor as a bishop must reckon with the fact that he is a bishop by virtue of his ordination; the discipline Rome imposed on him does not change that reality. With respect to the title "emeritus," Rome uses it as a technical term for a retired bishop but I do not use it because I know that, for English speakers, the term connotes honor and esteem, which neither we nor Rome attributes to the retired bishop.

One of the things we learn in life is that we don't always get our way. We did get some satisfaction relative to the Bransfield affair: to the best of my knowledge, the Holy See has never told a bishop in this country to apologize to his

people and to make some financial restitution to them. Rome did that to Bishop Bransfield, even if the “apology” was anemic and the financial restitution, though substantial, was less than we initially sought. I do think Rome’s decision is a “shot across the bow” to bishops that outrageous conduct will not be tolerated and will be punished.

I hope that we will not get stuck in endless quarrels that cannot change the past, but which can certainly bog us down in the present. As some of you have told me, we need to put the Bransfield saga behind us and move on to the work before us: making Christ known and loved in this State and serving those in need.

You all remain in my prayers and I ask you to remember me in yours. God bless you, your families and your parishes.

Sincerely in Christ,

+ Mark E. Brennan

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Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston