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To: The Clergy and Parishes of the Diocese of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island

Date: March 25th, 2020

Dear Friends;

I write today on the Feast of the Annunciation to Mary. It is a day when we give thanks for the message brought by an angel to Mary that she had "found favour with God" and that she would bear a son who would be called "Son of the Most High"... whose kingdom would have no end. It is an account both deeply comforting and deeply disturbing (at least for Mary). It required her active affirmation of God's plan and the assuming of no little risk. The times were perilous and they would be even more dangerous for her. Yet she says yes - "Here am I the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Reflecting on Luke 1:26-38 today I wonder: To whom are we an angel (messenger) today, bringing a word from God? What is the word from God being spoken to us? What is the task we are being asked to undertake in our own perilous time? What new thing from God is coming to birth? Do we appreciate how much we are "favoured (loved) by God?"

We give thanks today for parents and children, for strength and wisdom for parents amid the additional pressures on family life at this time. We give thanks for our own parents and those whom we have experienced as parents in our lives.

Since I wrote to you last Friday, a state of emergency has been declared in both Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. There are some minor differences in the restrictions which this places on residents in both provinces but the most significant message is – Stay Home! Don't go out except for necessary trips such as buying groceries. Even then it should be only one person in a household.

One of the consequences for parishes is that there are further restrictions on numbers of people permitted to gather. Gatherings are limited to a maximum of 5 persons in both provinces, and proper physical distancing must take place. Please take this into consideration if there is a necessity to gather. There have also been further restrictions on visitation to nursing homes and hospitals. Clergy may visit those who are at the end of life to bring the sacraments, although this may require advance conversations with health authorities.

It is wonderful to read of the ways that parishes are responding to the restrictions on gathering by offering a variety of forms of worship. In some places this has been a variety of technological ways to come together 'virtually'. In others worship leaders have shared printed resources and invited people to worship in their own homes, together in prayer but separate in location. On March 16th, 2020, I directed that there be no gatherings for public worship at least until April 3rd, 2020. This time frame was consistent with the decisions by both provincial governments to close the public school system until April 6th, 2020, and would give us time to plan for Holy Week and Easter.

It seems clear from comments made by government officials in the past few days that restrictions on gathering will continue past April 3rd, 2020. I am now requesting clergy and parish leaders to plan for a suspension of gatherings for worship for at least two months. This will mean that our observances of “the journey from the glory of the triumphal entry to the glory of the resurrection, by way of the dark road of suffering and death” will need to take unconventional forms. We continue to add resources to the Covid 19 section of the diocesan website to assist leaders in planning worship. If you have resources or suggestions, please send them to Canon Lisa Vaughn (lvaughn@nspeidiocese.ca) I also want to recommend the resource booklet distributed at last year’s MORE Mission School for “finding God in the neighbourhood.”

The Financial Management and Development Team met by video conference yesterday. They have agreed to proposals to put before a special video meeting of Diocesan Council on Friday March 27th, 2020. These proposals are for additional ways that the Diocesan structure may support parishes at this time. We are fortunate that budget surpluses over the past few years and good management, have given us a pool of working capital which we may use at this time. While this provides us some security in the short term, I need to be open about the fact that if the restrictions on gathering continue for more than three months, more difficult decisions will need to be made. Clergy and Parish leadership should plan accordingly.

These are strange and difficult times. Patterns and schedules are disrupted. We want to know when these changes to ‘normal’ life will end, even though there is no answer to this question at this time. Powerlessness can bring anxiety, it can also bring liberation. Be gentle with yourself. This is not a sprint this has become a marathon. Use some of the time, newly available in your calendar, to be quiet, to read and to pray. Be gentle with one another, we’re all feeling some extra stress at this time. We are making the best decisions that we can, knowing that tomorrow things will probably change. We are not alone.

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Blessings,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read '+ Ron Cutler'.

The Most Reverend Ron Cutler
Archbishop of Nova Scotia & Prince Edward Island