



# PRIESTLY SOCIETY OF SAINT PIUS X

## SAINT THOMAS MORE PRIORY

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Sanford, Monday, 30 March 2020

The Honorable Ron DeSantis  
Governor of the State of Florida  
State of Florida  
The Capitol  
400 S Monroe St, Tallahassee, FL 32399

Object: RELIGIOUS SERVICES AND COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS IN FLORIDA

Dear Governor Ron DeSantis,

We thank you for your remarkable works in this time of crisis and would appreciate your attention on the following considerations.

### **1. Practical Considerations**

All Floridians now find themselves in unprecedented and extraordinarily stressful circumstances. We are dealing, most for the first time, with empty store shelves and the associated material privations. Many are now unemployed, and many more will be in the near future. The first round of routine bills (mortgage payments, rents, utility bills, cable, phone and internet bills, etc.) since this crisis hit are coming due April 1, and more will follow. Every parent in the State is suddenly required to take on the additional duty of schoolteacher. Even those with relative stable economic positions are struggling to cope with uncertainty and fear for friends and family, as well as for themselves.

We often hear in connection with this crisis how important it is to save even a single life – in applying this compassionate principle, we must not forget that those who die from COVID-19, itself, are not the only victims. The longer this crisis goes on, the more we will find ourselves counting the deaths from suicide and domestic violence, to say nothing of the non-fatal psychological and physical harms that will also result, among the victims of this pandemic.

There is a limit to how much solace that media and virtual human interaction can provide – both to those who need help, and to those in a position to offer it. When we can actually see our neighbors – even from six feet away – we can much better determine who is having difficulty coping, rather than relying on these people to somehow identify themselves. These are precisely the sorts of times when Floridians are most keenly in need of the comfort and sense of community provided by their religious services. Church – especially in times like these – is far, far more than a “social gathering.” It is often the only effective means of satisfying deeply felt spiritual, psychological and even physical needs.

Just the other day, a husband brought his wife to our church – they are not members and had never been here before. His wife was in hysterics. He could not calm her down and she had not eaten in days. We were the only church he could find that was open. The sense of serenity and normalcy derived from our liturgy were effective in restoring her peace of mind and sending her on her way better able to cope with these trying times. While this woman may be a relatively extreme case, she is far from the only one whose health and sanity depend on the ability to continue – to some degree – her public religious observances.

We know that many churches have already closed or agreed to do so – we are aware that this is even the case with the Catholic churches in the Diocese of Orlando. For the reasons discussed above, it is our considered opinion that this is misguided and possibly even dangerous (although in their defense, some churches may simply have considered that they were not being given any other options). These widespread closures also place us in an even more precarious position.

Simply closing the churches does not take away the need for them. We are certainly not advertising for new members during this time, and have tried to increase social distancing by increasing the number of services we offer. However, these attempts are offset somewhat by desperate people are driving from all over the State (some over two hours each way) to get what they have been denied in their own communities. We have not yet had the heart to turn these people away.

We are sadly aware of churches that are simply flouting COVID-19 precautions. That is not our case; we do not presume that we will be miraculously spared from infection. However, we know that many people need our services nonetheless, and we believe that by taking reasonable precautions – akin to those imposed on supermarkets and similar businesses that invariably entail social gatherings – we can still provide religious services to our members while not exacerbating the spread of infection.

## **2. Proposed Solutions**

Rather than simply writing off religious services as “social gatherings,” we implore the authorities to establish reasonable conditions under which religious services can still be conducted. Below is a sample provision we believe would achieve this:

### Safety Standards for Religious Services

Churches and other houses of worship may continue to offer their customary religious services and the public may travel to attend such religious services in person, provided:

Attendance at indoor services is limited to 30% of the rated occupancy and proper social distancing is observed between attendees from different households.

Attendance at outdoor services is not limited in number, provided sufficient space exists to observe proper social distancing between attendees from different households.

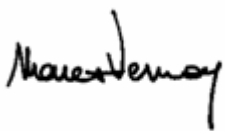
Attendees are not to gather more than 15 minutes prior to the beginning of the service and must leave no more than 15 minutes after the conclusion of the service, observing proper social distancing between attendees from different households at all times. No food or beverages are to be distributed to attendees during these times.

Cleaning and disinfecting of high touch surfaces is to be conducted according to the instructions provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/disinfecting-building-facility.html>) before and after each service.

A copy of these standards is to be prominently posted at the entrance of the religious establishment.

We thank you for your public service and tremendous efforts on behalf of Floridians during this trying time. Please help us so that we may continue to work with you to see Florida through this crisis.

Please receive our congratulations for you newborn daughter,  
God bless you and your family,



Father Marc Vernoy, Prior