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January 2022

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

You've been hearing about the resurgence of COVID-19 around the world due to the fast-spreading omicron variant. In Central Minnesota, cases caused by this variant are expected to peak in the next two to six weeks. Our local hospitals and other health care facilities are already experiencing staff shortages due to the virus. Resources are severely strained for treating patients not only with COVID but also other illnesses and emergencies. They hear daily from many on the frontlines of the COVID response of being tired and overwhelmed. As a result, CentraCare and other regional providers are asking communities to take added, temporary measures — including masking — to save lives and reduce the burden on the health care system.

We have been through so much since the coronavirus pandemic became a daily reality nearly two years ago. I and other community leaders have asked much of you over this time. I want to thank all of you who have complied with what has been asked of you these many months. You set a strong example for others in how we need to address this challenge together. I'm very grateful to you for that. We need to continue this diligence through the next wave.

As Catholics who believe in the value of every human life and in Christ's command to care for one another — especially the most vulnerable — we must step up and do our part. This is how we demonstrate love of neighbor and compassion for those who are suffering, including caregivers and essential workers. The responsibility of a bishop is to care for all the people of his diocese — Catholic and non-Catholic alike. He is a shepherd responsible for caring for his sheep, and many sheep are hurting right now.

We are a Church that understands the significance of sacrifice, and so I'm asking you to make some additional sacrifices for the good of our communities and our people. Health officials are asking us to take the following measures for the next six weeks. I will re-evaluate them at the beginning of Lent in early March.

• **Face coverings will be required for all indoor parish activities regardless of vaccination status.** This includes attendance at Masses, faith formation classes and other gatherings. Masks also will be required in our Catholic schools. Appropriate face coverings protect not only the wearers but also those with whom they come in contact, including those they will contact in their homes and communities.

• I'm also encouraging parishes to limit group events and meetings as much as possible for parishioners and staff during this period. When feasible, these gatherings should be moved online. Catholic schools will continue with in-person learning.

Your pastors and Catholic school principals are receiving information with more details regarding these requirements. I will notify them when the need for these requirements ends or if the timeframe of what I've outlined here needs to be adjusted for any reason. If we've learned anything over the last two years, it's that the behavior of the virus is not always predictable.

In addition to these added measures, I also encourage anyone who is eligible to receive a COVID vaccine. These vaccines and boosters offer a demonstrated increased level of protection for oneself and others and reduce the likelihood of a person needing hospitalization if they contract the virus. They have been consistently evaluated as morally acceptable by the Magisterium of the Church, and do not contain any fetal tissue.

If you are ill, please stay home from parish and school activities, including Mass. When the bishops of Minnesota reinstated the obligation to attend Sunday Mass last summer, they outlined several exceptions to this obligation. You are excused from the obligation if you believe your health would be significantly compromised, you are a caregiver to someone who is sick or homebound, or you are 65 or older, which puts you in a higher-risk category. I have encouraged pastors to continue livestreaming Masses; you may also watch the recorded Diocesan TV Mass on Sundays. A list of channels that air the TV Mass, as well as more information about the diocesan response to the coronavirus, can be found on our webpage: www.stcdio.org.

We can get through this latest surge if we work together. I ask you to pray for an end to the pandemic and for all those who have lost loved ones to COVID. Please also pray for our medical professionals who have done so much to serve us during this difficult time.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Donald J. Kettler

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Bishop of Saint Cloud