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February 14, 2022

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last month, as our region faced a surge in COVID-19 cases due to the omicron variant, I instituted additional pandemic protocols for our churches and parish facilities that included a face covering requirement regardless of vaccination status. I made this decision after consulting with local health authorities and other advisors in the interest of saving lives and protecting the most vulnerable in our parishes and communities. I also wanted us to help our health care facilities, which were experiencing a severe strain on their ability to treat patients with COVID-19 and other illnesses and emergencies.

I want to thank everyone who followed this temporary protocol. We are all weary of the pandemic and what it has required from us over the last two years. We've had to make many sacrifices. But we make them in light of our Catholic faith, which calls us to show care and compassion for our neighbors, including the elderly and those with underlying health conditions for whom the virus can have devastating consequences. Wearing appropriate face coverings is a simple and effective way to reduce the spread of COVID-19. I am very grateful for the sacrifices you made for others.

At the time, health authorities predicted that we would experience the peak of the omicron variant in two to six weeks. I have been in regular contact with them, and I've been receiving good news. Positivity rates for the virus in our region have been steadily declining, as have the number of people hospitalized for COVID-19. The stress on health care resources is also lessening.

**• In light of these positive trends, I am lifting the face covering requirement for indoor parish activities starting the weekend of February 19-20.** This includes for Mass attendance, faith formation classes and other gatherings. Catholic schools also will update their protocols in light of this change. Pastors and principals have been sent specific guidance about this.

At their discretion, pastors may continue the use of face coverings and institute other guidelines for liturgies, meetings, and large, in-person events in the interest of safety as local conditions warrant. It is important to follow the requirements and guidelines that your parish establishes. Anyone who feels safer wearing a mask should continue to do so.

I strongly encourage everyone who is eligible to receive a COVID vaccination. The vaccines and boosters are morally permissible, and they offer the best level of protection against the virus.

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Celebrating the Eucharist together as the Body of Christ is our greatest blessing. However, a reminder: If you are ill, please stay home and do not attend Mass or other parish or school activities. The obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days does not apply if you are sick or are in a situation in which your health could be significantly compromised. You may watch a livestreamed Mass broadcast by one of our parishes or the recorded Diocesan TV Mass.

Please continue to pray for an end to the pandemic and for all those who have been impacted by it. Lent is just a few short weeks away, and I also pray that you and your families have a blessed and holy Lenten season.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

+ Donald J. Kettler

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Bishop, Diocese of Saint Cloud