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Dear Clergy, Religious and Faithful of the Diocese of Antigonish, (Pastoral Letter 15 / 2020)

In my Lenten Letter, I spoke of the need to have an attitude of gratitude, remembering where we have come from, and where we are going with Christ and most importantly because of Christ. The sacrificial offering of Lent is ongoing as we endure this COVID -19 pandemic, and our faith continues to sustain us. In addition to the suffering and deaths from this pandemic, we have witnessed wave upon wave of tragedy in our province. We have been isolating and we have felt isolated especially from our families and church communities.

I know it is a great sacrifice not to be able to receive Holy Communion. Social distancing has caused a kind of involuntary fasting from sacramental reception of the Eucharist, and like all fasting, it should increase our desire for its return. This time of fasting also provides an opportunity to understand the Eucharist more fully as an act of self-offering joined to the perfect offering of Christ, the immaculate Victim. The Mass is much more than just celebrating a ritual in order to receive Holy Communion; it is our participation in Christ's perfect offering of himself and all of creation to the Father, and culminates in our reception of Holy Communion.

While we cannot now gather publicly, our priests continue to celebrate daily Masses, and I am grateful that so many pastors have been offering Mass through social media. We continue to pray for an end to the pandemic, as Pope Francis has encouraged. On May 1st, our clergy gathered in solidarity through social media with clergy from every other diocese in Canada to consecrate our country to Mary.

The doors of our churches are closed, but much has been happening in our Diocese and in the whole church. Since my Installation as Bishop in early February, we have had four Council of Priests Meetings through Zoom technology. I am pleased to announce the appointment of our new Vicar General, Father Thomas MacNeil who will assist in serving the Diocese. We have a new webmaster, Deacon Shawn Bigley and within a few weeks, we will launch a new, more user-friendly website. I have expressed our thanks to our retirees, our former Vicar General, Father Paul Abbass and our former webmaster, Deacon Art Riley. I have also written several pastoral letters, mostly informing and encouraging our clergy.

I have participated in six Zoom meetings with the Atlantic Bishops including our Spring Plenary on May 29. We have discussed common issues, including protocols for re-opening our churches. I want to assure you that we are getting closer to re-opening our churches. Our public celebrations of the sacraments were suspended, not out of fear, but out of the deepest respect for human life and health. We are a pro-life church and this pandemic is a pro-life issue. I participated in a Zoom meeting with Doctor Robert Strang, our Provincial Medical Officer of Health, the two archbishops of Halifax, and several members of other religious traditions to share our concerns and ideas for moving forward; we plan to meet again on June 15. As a Diocese, we are currently working on a plan to establish safety guidelines and protocols when we re-open our

churches. All of our parishes will follow a common plan of action. We will wait to open our churches when it is safe and when we are prepared to do so.

Unfortunately, this will not happen on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost is an important feast day and I have learned that the Mi'kmaq people especially were saddened to cancel their Pentecost celebrations. They have a special affinity to the gift of Holy Spirit at work in our lives. I hope that we can all celebrate the gift of Holy Spirit.

As we know, Jesus had promised his Apostles that "the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you" (John 14:26). That promise was fulfilled when the Spirit of God came down on that first Pentecost in wind and fire (cf. Acts 2:14). We should remember though, that what happened on that first Pentecost was not a one-time event. That was only the beginning. This mystery, the coming of the Holy Spirit, continues in our own day because, while the Spirit does not always come in great signs and wonders as it did for Mary and the Apostles, the Holy Spirit is always present and active in our hearts and in the life of the church.

We may struggle to understand the gift of the Holy Spirit. We cannot see wind. We can only see or feel or hear the effects that tell us the wind is there, all around us. We know the wind by its effects that sometimes comfort and at other times, refresh and still other times, destroy. Like the wind, fire can comfort, or refresh, or destroy. Wind and fire are sensual reminders of the power behind and beyond them, like the Spirit of God that we celebrate on Pentecost. The Holy Spirit transforms our minds, hearts and beings.

The coming of the Holy Spirit provided the apostles with the energy, momentum, enthusiasm, courage, and passion to get on with the task Christ had given them. The Holy Spirit would help them, but not do it for them. The change in them did not come about in an instant. It had to be a gradual thing. It had to be a growth process. As we know, growth can be slow and painful. We do not easily let go of our old ways, old habits, old attitudes.

We know people can change when they are given hope, when someone believes in them and gives them a task to do. Above all, people can change when they know they are loved. They come out of their shells and hidden energies are released in them. We too need someone to empower us so that we are able to take charge of our lives, and live them responsibly. This means being willing to change what needs to be changed in our lives. We need empowerment in order to witness to our Christian faith. The power that changed the apostles is available to us too. We need the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit energizes and strengthens our spirits and purifies our hearts. The Holy Spirit helps us to change our ways and we will need to change our ways as we move through this pandemic. It will not be back to normal but forward to normal.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, may we become more Christ-like and continue to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives as we pray: Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love to renew the face of the earth. May the Holy Spirit continue to guide and direct us during these difficult days.

(Most Rev.) Wayne Kirkpatrick
Bishop of the Diocese of Antigonish