

January 14, 2021

## To the Clergy and People of the Diocese

My Brothers and Sisters,

As the United States prepares to inaugurate its next president, while at the same time impeaching its current president, and just days following an insurrection raised against the government of the United States, with threats of more violence to come, we find ourselves in this country in unprecedented and frightening times.

### ONLINE PRAYER SERVICE ON JANUARY 20

As Christians and citizens, we will all play different parts in the days to come, but at all times we are called to a practice of fervent prayer. **Given the gravity of the events of next week, your bishops will be conducting a brief Zoom prayer service on Wednesday morning, January 20, the day of the inauguration, at 8:00 a.m.** We invite all across our diocese to tune in and pray with us, that we may be, across our differences, one people before God, raising one prayer together for the safety and well-being of our nation and peoples. The Zoom invitation will be sent out as soon as the link is available, and then again on Tuesday and early Wednesday next week.

If you can join us, we look forward to being together in prayer. If you cannot, please offer prayers on your own, wherever you are. Pray for the President and Vice President of the United States, and for the President-elect and Vice President-elect of the United State. Pray for the members of the Senate and House of Representatives, and for the Justices of the Supreme Court. Pray for the fractured and divided people of America. Pray for those who share your political convictions, and for those who don't. Pray for justice for those who live at the margins of society, and for those who by virtue of race and ethnicity have been denied the fullness of opportunity in America. Last week our Presiding Bishop selected several prayers and collects from our Book of Common Prayer and commended them to us for our use. Over these next days please make those part of your daily prayers that we may be one voice together in the Spirit.

### ASH WEDNESDAY

I am asking that our customary practice of imposing ashes during the Ash Wednesday liturgy, in all forms and manners, be suspended this year. The Imposition of Ashes requires too much intimacy of presence, and too much physical touching for us to do that safely in the midst of a pandemic surge. I am confident that we will have returned to our normal practices well in advance of the next Ash Wednesday, but this year it is imperative that we refrain from practices which carry too high a risk.

Some have proposed creative alternatives to the prayer book practice, including the use of Q-tips, "puffing" ashes into people's faces, sprinkling ashes on heads, or sending ashes home with people. May I say that the point of wearing ashes on Ash Wednesday is not the ashes themselves. It is the broken and contrite heart we present to God. "Rend your hearts and not your garments." In a conversation this week with some of our fellow bishops, Bishop Shin pointed out that the Book of Common Prayer does not expect or endorse any practice of ashes other than their Imposition by the minister at the liturgy, and is just as clear that the use of ashes at all is optional.

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The Imposition of Ashes in the liturgy, and “Ashes to Go” outside the church, are beloved traditions and practices. We will miss them. But our forbearance from these practices this year must just be counted among all of the countless losses we have experienced during COVID. All of these things and more will be given back to us. Until then, let us keenly and consciously feel the lack, perfect our exilic waiting, and seek no substitutes for the real things.

## REGARDING CONFIRMATION AND PARISH VISITATIONS

None of the bishops in this diocese have made parish visitations since March of last year, nor has the sacrament of Confirmation been celebrated during that time. We have from time to time set goals for returning to those practices, or for larger regional Confirmation services, only to have to continue pushing that forward into the future. We are now in 2021, COVID infections are climbing, while at the same time we believe that over the next several months most people will be able to be vaccinated. The danger from the coronavirus right now is quite high, but so are our hopes.

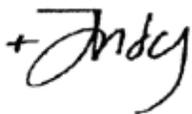
Under these circumstances, we your bishops have decided that we cannot safely make in-person visitations to parishes or administer Confirmation at this time. Frankly, there is too high a risk for us in being exposed to the hundreds or even thousands of people that comes with our making regular visitations, but there is also too much risk for people in our congregations in having us travel from church to church to church. The sacrament of confirmation itself requires too much intimacy and too much touching for this to be done safely at this time. So, we have decided that we cannot resume visitations or confirmations until we have ourselves been vaccinated, which we hope will happen before long, and then we will engage conversations with clergy about the readiness of your parishes to receive us.

I can speak for all three of us in saying that coming to your churches and confirming your people is the very best part of being bishop, and we miss it keenly. I am confident we will be making parish visitations in the fall, but I am hopeful that we will be making visitations by late spring. This notice will be a disappointment to some of you, I am certain, but I am convinced that this is the responsible decision at this time.

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That is all for now. Please join us in prayer next Wednesday and let us by our petitions and urgent supplications storm the throne of heaven on behalf of our nation, and our brothers and sisters in America. Until then, I remain

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "+ Andrew ML Dietsche". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

The Right Reverend Andrew ML Dietsche  
Bishop of New York