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Dear People of the Diocese of Calgary,

We would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to the people of the parishes in the Diocese of Calgary for their patience and cooperation in this latest round of in-person worship suspension. Our Sunday morning gatherings have always been, not only an opportunity to worship with those who share our faith, but also a main point of contact during the week. We have learned to rely on these encounters as the time and place where we find out what is going on in the lives of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, and to be able to share in their joys and sorrows. Not being able to gather has been an incredible sacrifice for many. We have found other ways to stay in touch, but its not the same as being in one another's physical presence. We understand that people are weary of this. We all want things to go back to "normal" but we still have some distance to run in the race that is before us, and we pray that God helps us to persevere.

While we have confidence in the efforts that have been made in recent months in our parish communities to guard against the spread of COVID in our in-person gatherings, the advent of the Omicron variant presented the world with a whole new set of circumstances, variables and uncertainties. This variant does not behave like previous variants. While it has been widely reported that this strain tends to produce milder infections, it has shown itself to be highly contagious and capable of infecting even fully vaccinated people. Reported daily death rates are once again in the range of the highest points seen in previous waves, and are expected to keep climbing. The result of this is that strain on people working in healthcare, and on our healthcare resources, is as great as it has been in previous waves, and it has yet to peak. We can expect the demand on healthcare providers and resources to increase even more in coming days.

Through it all, provincial public health officials have continued to ask Albertans to reduce their number of contacts by half to help slow the spread of Omicron, and the resulting strain on healthcare. The sacrifices we have made by suspending in-person worship have been one way that the Church has been able to respond to the need to reduce contacts. While it might seem to be nothing more than a token gesture on our part, it is a gesture that demonstrates our love of neighbours, family, friends, and others who work in healthcare. We have been keeping these people in our prayers, and by limiting our gatherings, we have been acting in a way that is consistent with our prayers. Please continue to pray for people who work in healthcare and do what you can to demonstrate compassion for them.

While numbers of hospitalizations and deaths have yet to peak in Alberta, wastewater monitoring is indicating that overall infections have peaked and are starting to decrease in most urban areas of Southern and Central Alberta. Monitoring in rural areas, however, indicates a lag behind urban areas as infection levels are still rising and have yet to peak. Factors such as this should be given due consideration when parish leadership makes decisions about when to return in-person worship.

Parishes in the Diocese of Calgary may return to in-person worship starting on Sunday, February 6, but it is strongly recommended that parishes should consider extending the in-person service suspension voluntarily for one or two more Sundays after that as we wait for hospitalization numbers to peak. Please encourage your parishioners to do all they can to slow the spread of COVID, and to stay healthy in other ways, thereby doing their part to help reduce demand on

healthcare providers and the health care system overall. Parishes that choose to return to in-person worship should be extra diligent in observing restrictions and should consider temporarily expanding protocols designed to mitigate the spread of the virus, i.e. not allowing congregational singing.

Thank you once again for persevering through this difficult time and the shifts and changes of our common life as members of the Body of Christ. While we should never downplay or underestimate the difficulties that many have face, I am also reminded of the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Romans. "...in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:37ff)

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Yours in Christ,

Archbishop Greg and the COVID-19 Task Force