



DIOCESE OF FAIRBANKS

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OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

P.N. BCZ 20/09

27 April 2020

DECREE

Coronavirus Update #3, Partial Opening of Churches and Public Worship

Dear Brothers & Sisters in Christ,

Peace Be With You! This was the greeting the Risen Christ extended to His disciples who were gathered in a locked room out of fear. Jesus walked through the locked doors, breathed the Holy Spirit upon them and greeted them with peace.

Last week, I had the opportunity to join our young adults in an on-line faith formation discussion. I recall a few of them sharing, “I feel just like the disciples in the Gospel from Sunday. I know what it means to be filled with isolation, fear, and confusion in a locked-up room.” Many similar experiences were shared about being “locked-up at home” during Holy Week and the Octave of Easter. I was encouraged by their optimistic attitudes about growing in their faith in a way they never expected. They expressed an intense, growing thirst for the Eucharist. Several commented that they were starting to understand what our brothers and sisters in the villages experience regularly, only having access to the Sacraments about every 6-8 weeks. The young adults acknowledged a burning desire to be back to Church physically with their faith communities for the celebration of the Sacrifice of the Mass.

As you are aware, on Tuesday, April 21, Governor Dunleavy announced Phase 1 for re-opening the State of Alaska. Several new Health Mandates have been published, permitting businesses to re-open provided precautionary measures are in place. This good news is based upon data indicating a reduction in the number of COVID-19 cases.

While the closing of church buildings and businesses occurred rather quickly, re-opening will be very different. It will happen in phases and each phase will have health guidelines to follow for the protection of the common good and to minimize the continued spread of coronavirus.

On Friday, April 24, Commissioner Crum announced that social gatherings and religious services will be permitted with general restrictions. These are published in Attachment N and can be found on the state of Alaska COVID-19 webpage.

I am excited that these guidelines will provide opportunities for the celebration of public Mass. I want to stress that this will not be an immediate return to the way it was before the closures. So, I kindly ask for your patience, understanding and cooperation.

After discussion with diocesan staff and other ministry leaders throughout the diocese I am issuing the following guidelines:

1. Attendance will be limited.

- a. Gatherings will be limited to 20 persons or 25% of the space (whichever is smaller).
 - i. Please allow others to attend Mass if you have been in the habit of daily attending daily Mass.
- b. If you do come to Mass, non-household members are to sit at least six feet away from each other.

2. Social Distancing will be practiced.

- a. All persons attending Mass will be asked to wear a mask throughout the liturgy.
- b. For communion, please stay six feet back from the person in front of you.
- c. I realize many individuals chose to receive Holy Communion on the tongue. Given our current health mandates we will only be able to distribute Holy Communion in the hand.
 - i. We ask that you receive communion in arms stretched out and palms face up.
 - ii. Step off to the side six feet from the priest.
 - iii. Unveil the mask and consume the consecrated host.
- d. Distribution of the Chalice will continue to be suspended.
- e. There will be no gathering greeting, holding of hands during the Our Father, or the exchange of the sign peace.

3. A general dispensation from the Sunday obligation will remain in effect.

- a. Those persons who are at risk are asked to stay home for your own benefit.
- b. Anyone who chooses not to come to Mass out of fear and concern of the Coronavirus is dispensed until further notice.
- c. We ask that those who are not able to attend Mass in person use social media to attend your Sunday obligation and pray the prayer for Spiritual Communion.

4. A risk still exists for anyone who attends public Mass or any public gathering.

- a. Even with best health practices and strict social distancing, anyone who enters a public space should recognize there is a risk of contracting the coronavirus.
- b. Improved cleaning will occur at our churches, but no one should expect that they will be any safer from germs than other public spaces.
- c. Please consider removing books or other common use items that would be regularly touched.
- d. Please refer to State of Alaska Health Mandate 16, Attachment N for specifics on keeping common space sterilized (attached).

5. Strive for progress and not perfection.

- a. There will no doubt be challenges and frustrations. Your family might not be able to attend Mass the first few weeks it resumes.
- b. For the interest of the common good, and ultimately to best serve our own community, we do not want to contribute to a *rebound effect* that would actually push normalized Mass attendance even further into the future.

These are general guidelines based upon the state of Alaska health mandates recommended for gatherings. Each parish community is different due to its location and size. It is very important that prior to any gathering in a diocesan building that you consult city or village directives and follow the directions unique to that locale. I ask that the parishes in the Y-K Region contact Sr. Kathy Radich and those in the Middle Yukon Region contact Br. Bob Ruzicka prior to holding any gathering.

Although Governor Dunleavy has loosened restrictions for the state of Alaska, it may be determined at the parish/village level that it is not wise at this time to re-open the church. The Governor mentioned numerous times in his briefing that it is very important to follow local guidelines that are developed uniquely for each village/city.

I greatly appreciate your prayers and deep sacrifices made during these very challenging times. As we move forward with these new guidelines, we will evaluate the process and adjust as needed. The state of Alaska will be looking forward to moving to the next phase if the data indicates that cases of COVID-19 are being managed adequately.

On Monday, April 27, those parishes on the Road System will publicize proposed weekend and daily Mass schedules in accord with Health Mandate 16. I ask for your continued flexibility and charity as schedules and numbers of Masses may change. Also, as we look forward, the entire diocese is facing a real crisis of lack of priests to celebrate Mass. Currently, we have 16 priests. Three more are in Nigeria with approved Religious Worker Visas but, at the moment, we have no idea when travel bans will be lifted or when the State Department will allow immigrants to return for work. We have two parishes that have not had Mass since Christmas. It is my responsibility to ensure *all parishes* in the diocese have access to the Sacraments. This will require the movement of priests and changes to what use to be. I greatly appreciate your understanding.

As we continue to adjust to the current circumstances, I urge families to meditate on the image of the Divine Mercy and to say the simple prayer of St. Faustina, "Jesus, I trust in you."

This Decree is effective immediately.

Sincerely in Christ,



†Most Reverend Chad W. Zielinski
Catholic Bishop of Northern Alaska
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