Concerning the Current Health Crisis Related to the Covid-19 Virus

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Fathers, Monastics and Faithful of the God-protected Diocese of Sitka and Alaska:

"Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." [James 5:14-16]

We all realize that there now exists a potential health risk related to the Covid-19 Virus that began in China. As of this writing, there have not been any cases reported in Alaska, but that could change at any time. We also realize that due to the seriousness of this outbreak, we do not want to put anyone at risk unnecessarily. Having said that, we also know there is the potential for miss-information as well, causing undue panic among the Faithful.

Therefore, as your bishop, I am giving the clergy and faithful of the Diocese of Alaska the following guidelines that were given by His Eminence, Archbishop Alexander of the Diocese of the South:

- It is an article of faith that the Holy Eucharist is received for the “healing of soul and body,” therefore nothing should change in regards to its reception.
- A common sense, and perhaps more aggressive, approach should be employed to cleanse parish facilities and objects with which parishioners come into regular contact throughout the week. I leave it to each rector or priest-in-charge to work with their parish councils to devise an approach that works best.
- There is every reason to believe that this virus can be transmitted by regular, human-to-human contact such as a fraternal greeting, veneration of holy objects, kissing the priest’s hand and partaking in a shared “zapifka” cup, or kissing the Chalice after Holy Communion. Therefore, I encourage communities to modify their practices as appropriate based on news related to the spread of the virus in their cities and towns. If a state or municipality in our diocese is on heightened alert because of an increase in the number of recorded cases of the virus, it is imperative that we take note and swiftly implement measures to inhibit the spread of the virus.
• If a situation is deemed “critical” by the CDC or other health authority in a state or municipality in our diocese, it might be necessary to temporarily adjust service schedules – diocesan leadership should be consulted in such cases (beginning with your dean).
• During this period of heightened awareness, parishioners who exhibit symptoms of the virus such as a fever, cough or shortness of breath should seek medical attention (please, beloved, err on the side of caution), and remain home until these symptoms have been treated and subside.
• During this period of heightened awareness, clergy who exhibit symptoms of the virus should make arrangements for a supply priest or (in cases of necessity) arrange for lay-led services.
• Recognize there are many in our parishes and missions (and indeed in our neighborhoods and among our friends) who may be impacted in tangible ways even if not sickened by the virus. Work disruption and the resulting loss of income, isolation at home due to any quarantine that might come, and/or simply the general anxiety many are feeling can have significant impact, particularly among single people and the elderly. I ask that clergy and faithful be particularly mindful of these impacts (viz. James 2.14-16), and to act concretely to render aid.

As a people who place their trust in God for all their needs in their life, we should have confidence that God has not left us in this time of crisis. Indeed, each day we pray to accept whatever He allows to happen to us. At every Divine Service we pray “For the peace that comes from above” to be with us. Let that peace now guide our life during this difficult time. Let us pray for those who are now suffering from the effects of both the virus or the resulting changes affecting many around the world.

The following prayer may be offered at the end of the Divine Liturgy, or adapted for an additional petition of the Fervent Supplication Litany.

Prayer during the crisis: O God Almighty, Lord of heaven and earth, and of all creation visible and invisible, in Your ineffable goodness, look down upon your people gathered in Your name. Be our helper and defender in this day of affliction. You know our weakness. You hear our cry in repentance and contrition of heart. O Lord who loves mankind deliver us from the impending threat of the corona virus. Send your angel to watch over us and protect us. Grant health and recovery to those suffering from this virus. Guide the hands of physicians, and preserve those who are healthy that we may continue to serve you in peace and glorify Your most honorable and majestic name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Your servant of Servants,

+ David, Archbishop of Sitka and Alaska