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## OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

To all the good people, the servants of God, of the Eparchy of Passaic, peace be with you! Thank you to everyone for your many works of love during this difficult time. Some of you risked your lives working in the hospitals or ambulances or transporting bodies. Some of you risked your lives as police or firefighters. Some of you kept open our grocery stores and pharmacies. Some of you carried food and medicine to the homebound. Some of you made phone calls to the isolated. Many of you prayed fervently for those suffering or dying. Many of you saved lives by staying home despite the loneliness or boredom—or crowding.

*The master said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things. I will set you over many things. Enter into the joy of your master!"*  
Matthew 25:23

### **Why were our churches closed?**

As bishop, I was following information from China, Korea, and Italy starting in January. When things became serious in New Jersey, I consulted a senior physician at the University of California, a man I have known since 1971 whom I trust. Based on his warnings, I met with the Consultors of the Eparchy of Passaic on Monday, March 16. The decision was made at that time. The only person I consulted after that was our Metropolitan Archbishop. The College of Consultors has continued to advise me since then, first every week, and then every two weeks.

*Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed. Proverbs 15:22*  
*Listen to counsel and accept instruction, that you may be wise all your days. Proverbs 19:20*

### **When can we return to our Churches?**

In some areas, our churches were never completely closed, and you are already free to visit them for prayer at different times. In a few parishes, the pastor is at high risk because of age or health problems, and he is required to protect his own health by divine law. Church services will resume in different areas when allowed by the Health Authorities. In most of our locations, services have continued throughout the emergency with less than ten people in the building. Full reopening will take place according to local conditions. If your priest has health problems, it may delay your reopening even though the rest of the area is open.

*He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will surely return again rejoicing, carrying sheaves of grain. Psalm 126:6*

**Why do we have to obey the health authorities? Shouldn't we obey God instead?**

The fifth commandment of the decalogue says, "Thou shalt not kill." We are required by God's law to protect our own lives and the lives of others as well.

*Do not bring on your own death by sin. For God did not make death, and it gives him no pleasure when the living die. Wisdom 1:12-24*

**What can I expect when public services resume?**

Social distancing will probably be required by the health authorities for many months.

- 1) When you return for a public service, there may be someone appointed by the pastor to facilitate social distancing. The priest cannot facilitate social distancing and also celebrate the service at the same time. Please be respectful of anyone appointed to assist. Please sit where you are asked to sit.
- 2) There may be limits on the number of people allowed in the church building. Please respect the rule, and anyone who is appointed to enforce it.
- 3) There may be markings in the church building or pews to control crowding, or to keep some pews empty. Please respect all of these measures. If we refuse to cooperate with these measures, we may find our services closed again.
- 4) Crosses and icons may be removed for awhile so that they are not kissed.
- 5) Your priest will need your help in keeping the church open and complying with health regulations. Please ask what you can do to help. Please cooperate with his requests.

*There is one body, but it has many parts. But all its many parts make up one body. It is the same with Christ. We were all baptized by one Holy Spirit so as to form one body. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27*

**Will communion be different?**

Communion will continue in our tradition of receiving both species. The priest or deacon will take precautions to avoid spreading disease, including sterilizing the hands before touching the sacred species, and sterilizing the spoon between communicants or using individual spoons that can be destroyed or other means. It is traditional to destroy sacred things by fire or by burial.

*Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." Isaiah 6:6-7*

**Will confession be different?**

The mystery of confession and absolution will be tailored to the particular church setting to avoid transmission of contagion between the two, confessor and penitent. In some churches, a doorkeeper has allowed one penitent at a time into the church. Please respect the arrangement of your pastor. Church tradition has maintained

consistently that sacramental absolution can only be given in person, not through electronic communications.

*Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered...When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long...Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not hide my iniquity. Psalm 32(31):1-5*

**Should I stay home from church, even though the church is open?**

In his chapter on the Holy Eucharist, St. Paul says, "Let each one examine himself." If you think you are contagious, or if you think you are in danger, you are dispensed from any obligations to attend. Please stay home if you do not feel well.

*And after these days, his wife Elizabeth conceived, and went into seclusion for five months. Luke 1:24*

**Is the novel coronavirus so dangerous that it justifies closing churches and putting most people out of work?**

We won't know the answer to that question until some time in the future. Whenever we respond to a perceived emergency, we always act on what we know at the time. Sometimes a school is cleared out because of a fear of fire or explosion that turns out to be based on mistake or deceit. Sometimes a commercial passenger jet is diverted at enormous expense and inconvenience based on information that is a mistake or deceit. As moral beings we can only act in a perceived emergency on what we know at the time. We have a moral obligation to protect life based on what we know at the time.

*For in the days of the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. Matthew 24:38-39*

**Shouldn't a priest be a hero and risk his life to give his people the sacraments?**

I can't answer that question for every priest in every situation. I can only say that in the Eparchy of Passaic today, if a priest dies, we will have a parish with no priest or maybe two or three parishes without a priest. Please don't put your priest at risk. Furthermore, the priest might become a carrier—this has happened on the East Coast with most grave consequences.

*Thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for my sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day." Ezekiel 34:11-12*

**Will we continue to have services on the internet?**

The amount of outreach that has occurred, even though our churches are closed for public services, has been astonishing—even miraculous. Thousands of people who

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never set foot in one of our churches have been worshipping online with us and seeing our beautiful treasures for the first time. Jesus commanded us to preach the Good News to all nations. The Gospel of St. Mark says that after seeing the empty tomb, the women were afraid and told no one. The Acts of the Apostles says that after the death of Jesus, the disciples were locked in a room out of fear. These strange circumstances have forced us to put our light on a lampstand instead of under a bushel basket. I was afraid that closing our churches would be the death of many of them, but instead they are experiencing a new life. I believe live streaming must continue at all of our parishes even after the virus is history.

*Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the Great Shepherd of the sheep our Lord Jesus through the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with all that is good to do his will, working in us what is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Hebrews 13:20-21*

I commend all the people of the Eparchy of Passaic to the protection of the great Archangel Michael, to the gentle kindness of St. Joseph, and especially to the care of the all holy Mother of God.

13th day of May, 2020

Your servant,

+ Kurt

Most Rev. Kurt Burnette  
Bishop of Passaic

