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May 22, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

May the grace and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us always!

Last weekend, many of our parishes began Phase I of the gradual process of reopening our church buildings and services. Today, many will begin with Phase II, which is the celebration of public Masses and the distribution of Holy Communion. Phase III will start next Friday, May 29, 2020, with additional religious services, other ministries, and limited access to buildings on church property. More phases will follow at appropriate times as needed.

Not all parishes can begin these phases on these start dates. Some will take longer because of local circumstances. Some may not be able to accomplish every part of a phase. However, all the parishes are working diligently towards these goals and will begin as soon as reasonably possible. Please check with your parish for information.

In the State of Alaska, the number of cases of the virus are low, but if we are not prudent and careful in our actions the situation can change. We are now in a management time as we attempt to practice our faith freely all the while trying to keep one another as safe as possible. I think we all know, that for now, we have to adapt to the reality of life such as it is. Hence, the parishes have developed for each of the phases of reopening a carefully considered and developed mitigation (safety) plan. These plans are essential at this time for our reopening to be successful by reducing the risk of infection.

Something common to all the plans is social (physical) distancing. Everyone with whom we consult, stresses the importance of social distancing for now. Unfortunately, this necessary practice of social distancing will limit the number of parishioners that can be accommodated in our churches for any given service. I thank you for your patience, understanding, and cooperation. Outdoor services provide more space which allows for more parishioners to attend while maintaining social distancing between vehicles, household groups and individuals.

Within the confined space of our churches, a cloth face covering should be worn. I highly encourage you to use these simple tools to keep us safer. I must admit, that for myself, I feel uncomfortable at times, and it takes a measure of the virtue of humility to wear one; in the church, the store, and anywhere I am near other people. But, I get satisfaction knowing that in a very small way, I am doing my part to protect my brothers and sisters who are in closer proximity to me.

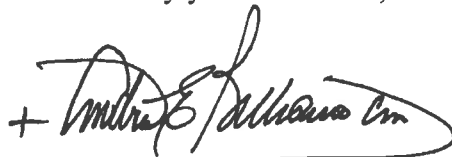
For now, the suspension of the obligation to attend Sunday Mass continues for those who are high risk, have other legitimate reasons, and for those who live in areas where no Masses are available. As always, the obligation to keep holy the Lord's Day remains. Even during these difficult days remember that our Lord never abandons us and is always with us.

As we go forward cautiously, I ask you please to be patient and respectful of your priests and one another as we practice our faith. Many of our parishioners are in the high-risk category. Also, let us not forget, that many of our priests, and deacons, and lay ministers are also in the high-risk group. We need to protect them as best we can.

I will provide additional updates on the progress of our reopening as they become available. I thank you for your cooperation and the many sacrifices you continue to make.

Let us pray for all those affected by this global pandemic, those who suffer from the virus, those who have died, and their families. We pray for those who suffer unemployment at this time, for those who suffer homelessness, addictions, and illness of any kind. We ask you most gracious God to bring relief to those who suffer, and we ask you to use us to alleviate the sufferings of others. Help us always to see the good in everyone, to treat everyone with respect and dignity, to cherish the gift of life, to protect the unborn, and remind us of the many blessings we have received from you to be placed at the service of all of our brothers and sisters. Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal: Pray for us who have recourse to thee. Jesus, we trust in you.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by the name "Andrew Bellisario C.M." in a cursive script. The signature is written over a horizontal line.

Bishop Andrew Bellisario, C.M.