



The Diocese of the West
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
Most. Rev. Benjamin
Archbishop of San Francisco
1520 Green Street, San Francisco, CA 94123-5102
(415) 567-WEST (9378)

March 18, 2020
St. Nikolai of Zica

Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy of the Diocese of the West:

All of us who have been entrusted with the care of souls find ourselves in especially difficult times. With all our faithful, all our fellow Americans, and, indeed, with the majority of people throughout the world, we are facing a pandemic of epic proportions. The physical health and safety of literally millions of people is at risk and their emotional health is being besieged on a daily basis. For us, as clergy, however, we have the added anxiety of seeing to it that those under our pastoral care have their ongoing spiritual needs met by the Church. Unfortunately, our usual way of ministering to our people has added challenges and can be accomplished only with great difficulty. While many may be second-guessing the directives given by the Holy Synod as well as my own application of those directives, I wish to assure you that these decisions were made only after much discussion and prayer, in a spirit of sorrow and repentance, and with the best medical knowledge we have at hand. I ask that you continue to pray for me and for all the bishops of our Church as we continue to face these trying times.

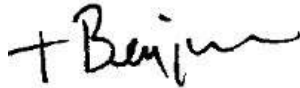
Certainly, the most difficult aspect of the current situation is that, out of love for all our brothers and sisters, especially for those among us who are most vulnerable, I felt compelled to temporarily suspend the celebration of the Divine Services throughout the Diocese of the West. I realize that, for priests in particular, the Sacred Services and the Holy Mysteries are our spiritual lifeline, our support and sustenance, and the fullest expression of our ministry. You can be assured that I have not made this decision lightly. Even in the face of government directives and the hope that this crisis will soon pass over us, it is hard to live this reality. I fully realize the hardship this has placed upon you and upon your parish communities and pray that, by God's mercy, this will soon come to an end.

It is important, indeed, it is essential, that we all pray for one another. It is also vital that you maintain your own spiritual life as you face the new challenges of caring for your flocks. Also essential to alleviating the stress and tensions of this temporary situation is the support you are able to give to one another. "Social distancing," of which we hear so much, should really be understood as physical distancing. It is not intended to convey a sense of social isolation. No one among our faithful or among the brotherhood of priests should be allowed to fall into a spirit of loneliness or isolation. I especially pray that

none of you will feel alone in this time and hope that you will also see to it that none of your brothers feel alone, isolated, or overcome by the weight and gravity of the present realities.

This Sunday we will observe the Sunday of the Veneration of the Holy Cross. While we will not be gathering with our communities, we should nonetheless reflect upon the meaning of the Cross in our lives, particularly as it is now being made present to us through the current crisis. Our faith assures us that beyond the Cross lies the Empty Tomb and the bright and glorious Resurrection of Christ. Therefore, together let us embrace the Cross as it has now entered our lives. Let us embrace that Weapon of Peace through which Christ has conquered our fallen human nature and even death itself. Let us embrace the Cross together, dear Fathers, bearing its burden together in the sure and certain hope of Christ's Victory.

I learned this morning of the death of six Catholic priests in one town in Italy. I cannot imagine the sense of loss their bishop feels. Quite frankly, I cannot afford to lose any of you and ask you to take care of yourselves this challenging time. I need each of you to help me carry my archpastoral cross.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+Benjamin". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+Benjamin
Archbishop of San Francisco and the West