



**CATHOLIC  
HOME  
MISSIONS**

# Mission Dioceses Respond to Coronavirus Pandemic



Fr. Michael Kim of St. Joseph's Church placed pictures of his parishioners in the pews during the COVID-19 shutdown.

By Beth Griffin

**P**riests in mission dioceses are accustomed to long stretches of solitude. They have developed innovative means to reach parishioners in sparsely populated rural areas. But the 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 created a new set of challenges, even in areas with few active cases of the virus. In this issue of *Neighbors*, we glimpse how four pastors helped nourish the faith of their people in a challenging time. Each serves in a diocese or archdiocese that relies on funding from Catholic Home Missions.

Fr. Michael Kim is a missionary priest in a home mission archdiocese. A member of the Korean Missionary Society, he is one of four priests from his congregation in Alaska. He is the pastor of St. Joseph's, a 71-family parish in Cordova, a remote fishing town in the newly merged Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau.

Despite having only one COVID-19 case in town, the entire community self-quarantined. Public Masses were suspended from mid-March through late May, following civil guidelines, Fr. Michael says.

He responded by livestreaming Sunday Mass, weekly Eucharistic adoration, and the Rosary and Stations of the Cross, especially during Holy Week. "People are searching for spiritual communion," he says. "They felt connected to the parish and one another and used Facebook to request prayer intentions."

Fr. Michael also wrote weekly letters to parishioners who do not use the internet.

Fr. Michael's birthday fell on Holy Thursday, and parishioners dropped off cards and photos of themselves in greeting and celebration. He affixed the photos to the pews where families regularly sit so that people could see themselves and their fellow parishioners onscreen during the livestreamed services.

"I hope this time of crisis brings out new and better ways of taking care of others and

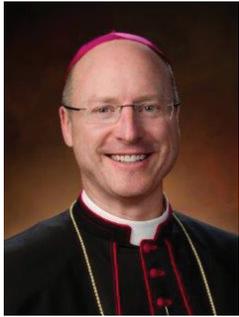
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# Neighbors

ISSUE 3 2020

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

# FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

When the COVID-19 global pandemic struck in the early spring of this year, countless lives were disrupted as stay-at-home orders closed businesses, curtailed travel, and suspended public religious services. With public Masses unavailable in dioceses across the country, Catholic clergy and laity alike had to adjust and live their

faith in new, unfamiliar ways.

Catholic home mission dioceses implemented protocols similar to those required in big cities regarding public worship, livestreamed Masses, social distancing rules, and other practices designed to stop the spread of the deadly coronavirus. In this issue, you will meet several priests from home mission dioceses in Alaska, Montana, and New Mexico and learn how they ministered to their flocks during the shutdowns.

The challenges facing people in home mission dioceses were amplified during the shutdowns. Fr. Scott Garrett, who normally flies his plane from village to village to serve his parishioners in Alaska, found himself grounded. With his plane in the shop for repairs just as the state shut down, he was unable to celebrate Communion services when restrictions were eased, as he had hoped.

Amid these challenges, we find cause for hope as communities have kept in closer touch using social media, streaming Masses, and gatherings in cars for Masses celebrated in parking lots. My prayer for you is that you read these stories and draw inspiration from the new ways in which the Church in mission territory worked to serve the people in a time of crisis. The suspension of public Masses during the spring not only affected the ways in which we pray together and minister to the sacramental needs of the faithful, but it also disrupted the plans of many dioceses to take up the Catholic Home Missions Appeal collection during those months. And so I thank you even more for your continued support, which makes it possible to minister to our brothers and sisters, even under these challenging circumstances.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight  
Bishop of Jefferson City  
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee  
on Catholic Home Missions

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praying for each other,” Fr. Michael says. “The precautions we took were not out of fear but out of love. We were all suffering, but we have hope.”

Fr. Michael has continued to livestream Masses through the busy summer fishing season to reach those who cannot make it to the church.

Fr. Scott Garrett is another missionary priest in the Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau. In normal times, he flies a plane from village to village three or four days each week, serving Catholics in 30 villages from his base in Dillingham. Like Fr. Michael’s area, Fr. Scott’s parish has no connecting roads. The primary industry is salmon fishing.

Because his parishioners are spread over such a large area, Fr. Scott says, “When I can’t fly, I’m pretty much dead in the water.”

Fr. Scott is also a canon lawyer, serving the Church throughout Alaska.

During the COVID-19 shutdown, he livestreamed Mass very early in the morning, when the weak internet service in his area is strongest, and he streamed a special Easter service for children. He called up to 10 people each day to check in. He fielded calls for counseling, he says; and while people were not able to attend Mass, they were thinking about the Church and the sacraments. The live-streamed Masses also helped Fr. Scott connect with people he knows from the lower 48 states.

His region had only one active case of the virus, related to the local



Fr. Michael Kim, pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Cordova, AK

salmon cannery, but he said people quarantined willingly. “We have a 12-bed clinic with two nonfunctioning 1970s ventilators. The sole commercial airline went bankrupt during the pandemic, so we were kind of paranoid that the virus would spread, and the only option would be to go home and die,” he says.

“There’s not a lot we could do until the fear was gone,” he says.

Fr. Scott’s plane was under repair in Anchorage when the state shut down. As restrictions lifted, the priest planned to livestream Masses and then fly into local landing strips for

Communion services. A lay colleague who is a former Army helicopter pilot helps him with Communion services but was not comfortable resuming her ministry in the early days of the reopening.

In the best of times, Fr. Scott lands in a village and walks around to meet the people. “They don’t come to me. I round them up,” he says.

“To have a priest out here is a real luxury.

People are accustomed to taking control of their own lives without outside help.”

Fr. Joseph Ponessa of the Diocese of Great Falls–Billings in Montana says his three parishes are in the middle of the least affected diocese in the state least impacted by the pandemic. While little virus-related stress arose, he and his parishioners went into “blizzard mode” and observed the state- and Church-mandated safety precautions in “strict obedience,” he says.

Fr. Joseph was able to continue celebrating Masses for up to 10 people. He says one grateful out-of-towner was so

happy to find an open church that he made a 90-mile round trip to attend Mass every day for two months.

At St. John the Baptist Parish in Jordan, Montana, Fr. Joseph invited people to assemble in their cars in the parking lot for Palm Sunday Mass. He set up an altar just inside the doors of the church and hooked the speaker system to the church bell tower. “You could hear the Passion all over town,” he says.

“There were 23 cars in the lot, with their windows rolled up, but I could see people’s lips moving as they said, ‘Crucify him!’”

To accommodate 160 worshippers for Easter, Fr. Joseph offered two Masses each day for the Easter octave and says he had 100% parish attendance. His plan for when the state eased restrictions included scheduling Masses every other weekend in each parish to allow 14 days between Masses and prevent infection if the virus breaks out once more.

Looking back, Fr. Joseph says, “I did two things right. On the last Sunday before the shutdown, I anointed everyone in the church. Fear is an illness, and we are all vulnerable.”

“I figured, why wait until people get sick? It set people at ease, and I may do it again,” he says.

“Also, on that last Sunday, I collected everyone’s e-mail address and sent notices and the bulletin electronically. It was a big plus, and I’d like to keep it up,” he says.

With the return to normal, albeit with social distancing, Fr. Joseph says he will retain the single Communion line he

instituted during the restrictions. “People are more devout when there is only one line—and I am not swiveling from side to side to accommodate two lines,” he says.

Fr. Joseph says the diocesan request for people to receive Communion in hand was difficult for some to accept, “but they did it out of love for their priest and others who may be vulnerable.”

Finally, Fr. Bill McCann is rector of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Las Cruces, New Mexico. At the height of the virus-related shutdown, Fr. Bill offered Masses in the cathedral parking lot, with audio transmitted over an FM radio signal. He distributed Communion car to car.

Throughout the pandemic crisis, Fr. Bill and two other priests, including Bishop Peter Baldacchino of Las Cruces, offered the Sacrament of Reconciliation outdoors under a large canopy. “People came from other places, including Texas. One Saturday, three of us heard confessions for two hours straight, with priests and penitents wearing masks,” he says.

“I’ve been impressed at the boldness of the bishop. Ours was the only diocese in the United States to celebrate the Easter Triduum publicly, and the parking lot was full. Our goal was not to shrink back out of fear but to do what we could to minister to the people,” he says.

As restrictions eased, Fr. Bill retained a Sunday parking-lot Mass in addition to three indoor Masses where social distancing is practiced. “Some people are reluctant to come indoors,” he says.

Fr. Bill predicted that people will take careful note of how the Church responded to people in need. “People are suffering physically and economically. As time goes on, it will become more severe. It is important that we are present and try to get the sacraments to them,” he says. 🌿



**Fr. Scott Garrett beside his airplane, which he flies from his base in Dillingham to serve Catholic families in 30 villages.**



Strengthening the Church at Home

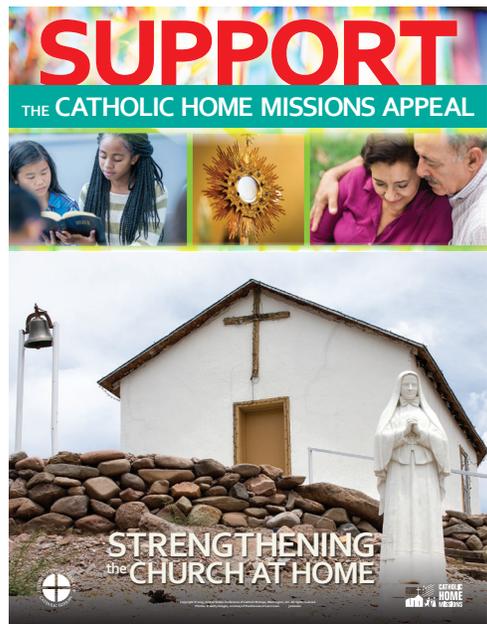
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READ ABOUT HOW mission diocese priests in Alaska, Montana, and New Mexico ministered to their flocks during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns.



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