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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Every year we experience cold and flu season. These past weeks we have heard of the growing number of world and nationwide cases of the coronavirus (COVID-19). On Friday, it was announced that there was a coronavirus case here in Omaha. This has raised concerns in the Christian community, particularly regarding the practice of Holy Communion. The *World Herald* recently reported how our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters in Omaha are handling these concerns.<sup>1</sup> I would like to take this time to address any concerns among the flock at Mount Calvary.

As Lutherans, discussions of doctrine and practice are begun and governed by God's own Word. The Lord Jesus that the Sacrament is His true Body and Blood given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. He gives the Sacrament to us for our good, as a source of life, forgiveness, and for the healing of soul and body. St. Paul speaks of the chalice as "the cup of blessing" (1 Cor 11:16).<sup>2</sup> These words and promises are to be foremost in the minds of Christians.

Some, while firmly believing our Lord's Words concerning the Sacrament, may still have concerns about the spread of illness. Here are a few notes on our practice at Mount Calvary as well as some additional precautions that began this past Sunday. These are to reassure and encourage you to be at ease during a moment that is to be a time of joy and blessing, and not fear or worry:

- I wash my hands during the collection of the offering (I also refrain from touching anything with the hand I use to distribute the Lord's Body). Beginning this Sunday, I will also use hand sanitizer immediately before the communion liturgy. Those who assist in the distribution of Holy Communion will also wash their hands before entering the chancel.
- In addition to the antiseptic nature of the alcohol in wine, the interior and exterior of the chalice are plated in precious metal, which has natural antibacterial properties.
- Beginning this Sunday, the purificator (the cloth used to wipe the chalice between communicants) will be soaked in Everclear, which is 95% alcohol.

*A note on Individual cups:* We also offer plastic individual cups. Their use began in churches that did not use wine due to the popularity of the temperance movement and the belief by some churches that the consumption of alcohol was a sin. Common cups of nonalcoholic grape juice did not have the benefit of the antiseptic properties of alcohol and there was the desire to reduce the risk of spreading disease. The chalice is, in fact, more sanitary than

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Cole, "No sin in taking precautions at Mass" *Omaha World Herald*, Wednesday, March 4, 2020, 3a.

<sup>2</sup> While the Roman Church permits only distributing the Body of Christ to the laity (called "communion in one kind"), a practice that has been advocated in light of the coronavirus, our Lord's words do not permit such an alteration. We make use of His Testament as He instituted it.

individual cups which are touched by the fingers of others throughout the course of preparation and distribution. Individual cups cannot be cleansed as thoroughly as the chalice and the plastic does not kill germs the way precious metal does.<sup>3</sup> Choosing to receive the Lord's Body on the tongue rather than in the hand eliminates the chance of infecting yourself with any germs that may be on your hand from touching contaminated surfaces.

- All communion ware is washed in hot water with soap after use in a service.
- A large bottle of hand sanitizer is on the table in the narthex that members are encouraged to use as they enter and exit the church building.
- Finally, for the short term (until Easter), though I will be in the Narthex before and after services to greet, I will not shake hands.

Christians live in faith toward God and in love toward one another. Faith drives us to receive what the Lord gives us, trusting in His promises. We trust in Christ's mercy to see us through this and all sorrows of this life. There are also times when love for our neighbor leads us to remain home. If you have flu symptoms or a severe cold please stay home and call the church office. I will gladly visit you with the Lord's Word and Sacrament. I am also happy to visit those who, on account of age and compromised immune systems, have been advised to stay home and avoid large gatherings for the present time.

As we wait and pray for the Lord to relieve us of this affliction, please follow the CDC's suggested preventative actions: avoid close contact with people who are sick and stay home when you yourself are sick; avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth; cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue; clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe; wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.<sup>4</sup>

If you have further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak with me. Let us pray that the good and gracious Lord of Creation would soon relieve us of pestilence and fear:

*Almighty and merciful God, You alone are to be feared and, through the mediation of Your Son, You relieve all fears and set us at peace. Spare Your people, O Lord! Forgive us our sins, and do not allow the fear of death to enslave us. Grant relief to those who are sick, and comfort those who mourn. Sustain all medical personnel who attend the sick, and bless the efforts of those who work to discover a treatment for this disease. In these times of affliction and distress, strengthen us by Your Word and Spirit to continue steadfast in the one, true, saving faith; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our suffering Lord and Savior, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you,

*Pastor Gerike*

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<sup>3</sup> A study from 1997 in which 681 participants drank daily from a shared cup showed they were at no higher risk of infection than those who participated less frequently or who abstained entirely. Additionally, "no documented transmission of any infectious disease has ever been traced to the use of a common communion cup." See "Risk of Infectious Disease Transmission from a Common Communion Cup," *American Journal of Infection Control* (October 1998) vol. 26, no. 5; James Pellerin and Michael Edmond, "Infections Associated with Religious Rituals," *International Journal of Infectious Diseases* (November 2013), vol. 17, no. 11.

<sup>4</sup> From [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)