



## The HOLY SYNOD of the ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

### **Statement of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America on the Corona Virus March 13, 2020**

Since January of this year, the world has witnessed the rapid spread of a virus named SARS-CoV-2, and the disease it causes that has been named Coronavirus Disease 2019, or Corona Virus, often abbreviated as COVID-19. We make the following statement in response to the increase in the number of people who have tested positive for COVID-19, and the anxiety that the spread of this virus has understandably caused amongst our faithful in the United States, Mexico, and Canada. In this statement, we also offer pastoral guidance for the parishes and institutions of the Orthodox Church in America in taking certain necessary, but temporary precautions, so as to mitigate the possibly extreme effects of this virus.

The Church is the mystical body of Christ. Nothing can affect or change this sacred mystery. Furthermore, nothing that is done in all reverence, piety, and fear of God in response to this virus should be construed as anything other than a prudent pastoral and temporary response to a situation that has the possibility of severe consequences. As the body of Christ, we should meet the challenges posed by this virus with the assurance of faith, in oneness of mind, and in imitation of the Great Physician and Healer of souls and bodies, our Lord Jesus Christ. All members of the Church should seek to console the anxious, assist those afflicted, and encourage those working in medical professions. All faithful should pay special attention to those who might be at risk of more serious complications from this virus: the young, the elderly, and those who already have respiratory or cardiac illnesses. Indeed, no one should be stigmatized or ostracized because they have contracted the virus.

If, however, any member of the Church – clergy or laity – presents symptoms of COVID-19, they should refrain from attending services for the period of time directed by medical authorities, presently fourteen days. As always, we encourage our clergy to note carefully who might be absent from liturgical services and reach out to them, ascertaining if they are ill or in need of pastoral care due to this virus.

We assure all members of the Orthodox Church in America that we, the members of the Holy Synod, love and pray fervently to our Almighty God for all those whom he has entrusted to our pastoral care. May the God of every consolation, the God of mercy, love, and compassion restore to health those who are ill, strengthen the families of those afflicted, and guide those ministering

to them. We also direct all members of the Church to offer prayers for the afflicted, for their families, for those who are ministering to them, and for those who are anxious or troubled by this situation. We direct that the following prayer be used in divine services immediately after the exclamation of the Litany of Fervent Supplication (For thou art a merciful God...):

Let us pray to the Lord.

**Choir:** Lord, have mercy.

O God Almighty, Lord of heaven and earth, and of all creation visible and invisible, in thine ineffable goodness, look down upon us, thy people gathered in thy Holy Name. Be our helper and defender in this day of affliction. Thou knowest our weakness. Thou hearest our cry in repentance and contrition of heart. O Lord who lovest mankind, deliver us from the impending threat of the Corona Virus. Send thine angel to watch over us and protect us. Grant health and recovery to those suffering from this virus. Guide the hands of physicians and preserve those who are healthy. Enable us to continue to serve our suffering brothers and sisters in peace that together we may glorify thy most honorable and majestic name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.

**Choir:** Amen.

We should be mindful of our stewardship commitments to our parishes, but also increase our charitable giving so that those who fall ill might not also fall into debt and hardship, because of lost wages.

We offer our prayers to the Almighty God for those who have died because of COVID-19, and we extend our condolences to their families, friends, and loved ones.

The outbreak of COVID-19 requires our dioceses, our parish communities, and their faithful to be vigilant in keeping our parishes safe. Careful, precautionary, and *temporary* steps taken now can prevent extreme spread of this virus.

Churches and institutions should adopt common-sense measures as advised by the CDC [<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>]. In addition to these measures, we direct the following steps to be taken in the Church until such a time that this virus no longer poses a serious danger:

1. Members of the Church should become familiar with the symptoms of the Corona Virus (fever, cough, shortness of breath, and other symptoms as may be publicized by medical authorities), and, if these symptoms present themselves, both seek medical help immediately and self-quarantine for fourteen days. If clergy present such symptoms, they too should seek medical assistance and self-quarantine for fourteen days, and inform their dean, chancellor, or bishop that they are unable to serve the sacred services. Even though they might be absent from services, affected clergy and faithful should maintain their prayer rule, engage in spiritual reading, watch services transmitted over the internet, and utilize the wealth of liturgical resources available on the website of the Orthodox Church in America

2. Everyone should wash their hands thoroughly and frequently, cover coughs and sneezes, and avoid sharing personal items. In particular, all persons who serve in the altar, before they cut

bread, pour wine, pick up candles, etc., as well as those who are involved in serving at social events, should make every effort before they fulfill their roles to wash their hands thoroughly.

3. Church leaders should see to the careful cleaning of frequently touched objects such as icons, chalices, Communion spoons, and the blessing cross. Communion cloths should be respectfully washed more regularly, or discarded and replaced. Disposable cups should be used for water and wine that is often offered after Holy Communion (so-called zapifka), or the practice of using antidoron alone may be implemented.

4. Furthermore, as with our temples and sacred objects, Church leaders must take every effort to keep scrupulously clean every part of our facilities, social halls, kitchens, bathrooms, etc. Hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes should be readily available, as well as soap and disposable towels in the bathrooms, and disinfectant wipes.

5. For this period, as a temporary measure, the faithful should respectfully refrain from physical contact when receiving blessings from and greeting a bishop or priest. Likewise, the faithful should temporarily refrain from greeting one another with the traditional three-fold Kiss of Peace.

6. During this time, Churches should exercise what the authorities call social distancing. As such, communities should minimize, for the interim, occasions for social gatherings. Those parishes that have coffee hour should be sure that food is distributed by individuals wearing gloves, and that disposable paper plates and cups and plastic utensils are used. Choral leadership should also consider the arrangement of choir members and place them at a safe distance from one another.

7. As with other local Orthodox Churches, in response to the challenges posed by this virus, and ever mindful that we must do our part to contain its spread, we nevertheless do not permit changes to the practice of giving Holy Communion.

In cities and communities where the effect of this virus is severe, the diocesan bishop must be consulted for the blessing to adopt further *limited* measures to prevent the spread of disease in the context of liturgical gatherings, which could include a temporary alteration of normal liturgical life. In the New York metropolitan area, we have already witnessed at least one Orthodox Church, as well as other religious congregations, closed down because of emergency orders by the civil authorities. If parishes of the Orthodox Church in America are directed to do the same, they should a) alert their diocesan bishop immediately, and b) seek to comply with the directions of civil authorities.

We seek in these measures to follow the principles enumerated by His Eminence Metropolitan Nicholas of Mesogeia of the Church of Greece who said, “All measures that undermine faith and hope in God, anything that doubts the efficacy of Holy Communion and the mysteries is to be rejected. Anything that honors the community of the faithful and our fellow man is an expression of love for them and for God.” In the midst of our Lenten journey to Pascha, beloved children in the Lord, we are given an opportunity, paradoxically, to honor and serve our neighbor as we struggle with this virus. May our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, enable us to bear the struggle that is set before us, granting us the wisdom and discernment to know what is well-pleasing to him, and the strength to accomplish it.