



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

33 Hewitt Avenue - Bronxville, NY 10708
Office (914) 779-6580 Fax (914) 779-6581
www.nynjoca.org

Archpastoral Letter Regarding the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Dearly Beloved of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

*“In the world you will have tribulation;
but be of good courage: I have overcome the world.”*

(The Words of Our Lord, in the Gospel of John 16:33)

This very day, we live in a time of unprecedented crisis. Together as our Church, as our country, and as our world, we face the onslaught of the Coronavirus. The COVID-19 pandemic now numbers over 216,000 --confirmed cases across the globe, and more than 8,000 cases in our nation, now in all 50 states of the U.S. The virus has claimed the lives of nearly 9,000 persons world-wide, and more than 100 individuals in the United States alone. These numbers increase more rapidly each day, and at this point in time, there appears to be no established end in sight.

In our country, we have witnessed the suspension of the NBA season, the shutting down of colleges and universities for the rest of this academic year, many cities imposing 8 p.m. curfews on their residents, and the National Guard blockading a community not very far from where I live. We have seen the volatile sell-off of stocks and the initial mass lay-off of workers, the closing of restaurants and movie theaters, and the emptying of shelves in grocery stores. It is apparent that life is not at all the same as we knew it but a few weeks ago.

How are we as Orthodox Christians to respond to this crisis? Certainly not with fear! Corona-phobia could be as disastrous for us as the virus itself. How many times in the Scripture do we read the words of Our Lord: “Do not be afraid!” Does He not promise us, “I am with you always ... even to the very end of the world”? Has He not guided the Church through the Bubonic Plague and the Spanish Influenza, two World Wars and countless other conflicts, the Great Depression and several recessions, persecutions and martyrdoms in every generation?

This is a time, my beloved, not for fear ... but for FAITH! Perhaps the best approach to these uncertain days are the words of the second-century bishop and martyr, Ignatius of Antioch, who tells us: “Look to the signs of the times ... but then look to the One Who is beyond time” (Letter to Polycarp 3).

Signs of the Times

While in no way trying to minimize this crisis, we must remember that we have a great advantage over past generations and centuries in the face of pandemics: the research and discoveries of medicine and science. Even now, scientists and doctors are working feverishly to discover a successful treatment and vaccine to combat this virus. In the meantime, they have identified the individuals most vulnerable to Coronavirus, given us a list of warning signs for the disease, provided guidelines for necessary quarantine, and set a protocol for all to follow to prevent the virus from spreading further and faster. We have to learn these directives and follow them.

All of us, it would seem, are potential carriers or victims of this disease. But doctors tell us that the most vulnerable are: people aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions), people under 70 with chronic heart disease, respiratory illnesses, kidney, liver or spleen issues, neurological conditions, diabetes, a weakened immune system, or being overweight. These individuals must take note of the signs – and be careful – and we must take care of them.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has identified the signs of the Coronavirus that we must watch for: fever and tiredness, dry cough, headache, muscle pain, and shortness of breath and chest pain. Physicians tell us not to go to the Emergency Room first, but rather call the family doctor, explain the signs, and get guidance from him/her as what to do next. Whether we are told to scrub our hands thoroughly for 20 seconds with warm water several times a day, cover our coughs in our sleeves, keep our churches clean – or to keep ourselves separated from others at a distance of six feet, we are to listen and obey! If we are told not to go into crowds of more than so many people, or self-quarantine ourselves for two weeks if we have come into contact with someone who may have contracted the virus, we need to listen and obey! Health care professionals tell us that these are the ways to “flatten the curve” of new infections so that our hospitals do not become filled beyond capacity. We must listen ... and obey. The Scripture tells us: “Honor the physician with the honor due him, according to your need of him, for the Lord created him ...” (Sirach 38:1).

It is imperative that we observe the “signs” of the times, and obey the directives of the medical and scientific professionals. If that means absenting yourself from church for a time, then so be it! Even in ordinary times, our Church does not insist that you fast, if you are ill or pregnant. Nor does the Church expect you to participate in an All-Night Vigil, if you are physically weak. Likewise, in this critical time, when so many are vulnerable and at risk, the Church wants your health and well-being and advises that you stay at home. It is not a sin to miss divine services because of a pandemic! As your bishop, who loves you and wants the best for you, especially your good health, I urge you wholeheartedly to heed “the signs of the times,” and follow them. Listen, and obey!

Look to the One

Having said all of the above, we do not want you simply to “stay home and veg.” We are the Church, a people of prayer, a people committed and belonging to the Divine Physician of souls and bodies, Our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. In the midst of all of this pandemic confusion, we should turn first and foremost to Him in prayer, trusting in His love and His words. Of course, the Divine Liturgy is “the prayer of the Church par excellence” in which we offer up to God the Father, the very Body and Blood of His Only Begotten Son, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We need to keep our Prayer Rule every day, and perhaps increase it in this time of crisis. And in this situation during which most of us find ourselves at home more, with time on our hands – we need also to pray reader’s services for our family, our friends, our neighbors, and all those afflicted by this pandemic, at our Icon Corner – especially if we are not coming to Church.

In crises past – plagues, epidemics and wars – the first thing people would realize is that they needed to pray. Not just religious leaders, but government officials, would call on people to pray. By and large, that is not happening in our country; so, we the Church must call our members to prayer – for themselves, their families, their neighbors, the world. We must bring the elderly and the vulnerable, the sick and suffering, those in fear and anxiety, to Our Lord, the Divine Physician – on the stretcher of prayer!

On the website of the Diocese, you can find a Family Prayer Rule, a Reader’s Service for Vespers, a Reader’s Typika Service (in lieu of Liturgy), and a Service of Prayer for Protection from the Coronavirus. I urge you to set times every day for prayer with your family from one or more of these service books. If you do not have a computer to print them from, contact your pastor and he will gladly provide you with them in printed copy.

Additionally, you should telephone people who are alone, and pray with them, so that they know that the Church has not forgotten them. You can send a note of encouragement, a word of prayer, a card of well wishes to those members of the Church who are separated from you by this epidemic.

But most of all, be sure to offer their names in prayer to the Lord every day. St. James tells us: “... pray for one another that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” (James 5:16). My Beloved, in this crisis, let us be a People of Prayer.

Amidst our present climate of insecurity and anxiety, may we all remember the words of St. Paul, written to the Church at Rome, and make them our own: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:35-39).

My beloved Clergy and Faithful, with all my heart I thank you for all that you are doing, and all that you will do, to carry one another on the “stretcher of prayer” to the feet of the Divine Physician. In this time of trouble, I commend you to Him, the God Who loves us more than we love ourselves, and to His loving care.

With my humble prayers, archpastoral blessing and sincere love,

f Michael
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Archbishop of New York and the
Diocese of New York and New Jersey