

NEW YORK STATE DEANERY
THE DIOCESE OF NEW YORK AND NEW JERSEY

Report to the 2021 Diocesan Assembly

Your Eminence, brother clergy, lay delegates and observers to the Diocesan Assembly, Glory be to Jesus Christ!

I ask for your indulgence, as I would like to begin this report by quoting our Archpastor, Archbishop Michael, at the beginning of the pandemic: "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"!

The world that we took for granted just 18 months ago has ceased to exist. Our country is a nation that has long been known for, and has celebrated, freedom of movement. We are a people on the move. We are in an almost constant state of interaction with others, be it in restaurants, bars, theaters, gymnasiums, stores, businesses, schools, or sporting events. Now, suddenly, that movement has ground to a halt. We have become a people in self-imposed house arrest. And as city, state, and federal governments has warned, if we do not voluntarily cease unnecessary social interaction, then the government is prepared to enforce our isolation. Our world has drastically changed. The only question is whether that change is short-term, long-term, or permanent.

In an almost unprecedented display of governmental authority, church attendance has been severely curtailed. Authorities have directed that all gatherings be limited to fewer than 10. For a year, most of the Church worship services have ceased altogether. The overwhelming majority of churches were cooperating with these directives. So, even within the church, virtual communities have become mostly communities that we have.

How are we, as Orthodox Christians to respond to a world caught up in the midst of a pandemic?

A Surprising Source of Answers: The Church Fathers

You may be surprised to learn that we can find help in our search for answers from the early church fathers. For we are not the first generation of believers to face that question. In fact, less than 150 years after Christ's resurrection a devastating pandemic swept across the Roman Empire, one of a series of plagues that killed millions.

For a description of how Christians living in the time of the Roman Empire faced these pandemics, I recommend the book *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, by Rodney Stark (Princeton University Press, 1996). Chapter 4, "Epidemics, Networks, and Conversion," begins by describing the devastating impact that these epidemics had on the empire, something that has been largely ignored in the history books.

The first great pandemic, referred to as the Plague of Galen, was during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. It began in 165 AD and lasted 15 years. The cause may have been the first appearance of smallpox in the Western world. So devastating was this pandemic that by the time it was over between a quarter and a third of the empire's entire population had died. Aurelius wrote about the plague, describing caravans of carts and wagons hauling away the dead. Entire cities and villages were abandoned. The emperor himself joined the casualties when he died of the plague in Vienna in 180 AD.

Then from 250 to 262 another plague, the Plague of Cyprian, struck the empire. This time the culprit may have been measles. When striking a previously unexposed population, both measles and smallpox can be quite deadly. At its height 5,000 people a day died in the city of Rome alone.

Keep in mind that when these plagues first hit only a few generations had passed since Jesus walked the hills of Galilee. Christianity was still in its youthful, vigorous, formative, years. How did those early believers respond to the pandemics that they faced? What can we learn from their example? Their own writings offer testimony to what they believed and how they acted on those beliefs.

In his Easter letter in 260 AD Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, wrote a lengthy account of the efforts of local Christians to nurse plague victims, often at the cost of their own lives.

“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life supremely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead. . . . The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.”

This self-sacrificing behavior on the part of Christians was all the more remarkable when you realize that the plague arrived on the heels of a wave of three years of persecution of Christians, by order of the Emperor Valerian.

Dionysius then contrasted the behavior of Christians with that of unbelievers:

“The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.”

Stark’s account of how the famous Roman physician, Galen, responded to the 160 AD plague that bears his name is consistent with Dionysius’s account:

Galen lived through the first epidemic during the reign of Marcus Aurelius. What did he do? He got out of Rome quickly, retiring to a country estate in Asia Minor until the danger receded.

He goes on to note that Galen’s response “was not seen as unusual or discreditable at the time. It was what any prudent person would have done, had they the means.”

What accounts for the dramatic difference in the pagan and Christian responses? I am reminded of what happened during the 9/11 attack on the Twin Towers. As thousands ran from the towers, firefighters and police ran toward them. Stark points to the contrasting belief systems of paganism and Christianity as the explanation:

“For something distinctive did come into the world with the development of Judeo-Christian thought: the linking of a highly social ethical code with religion . . . the notion that more than self-interested exchange of relations was possible between humans and the supernatural. The Christian teaching that God loves those who love him was alien to pagan beliefs. . . . Equally alien to paganism was the notion that because God loves humanity, Christians cannot please God unless they love one another. Indeed, as God demonstrates his love through sacrifice, humans must demonstrate their love through sacrifice on behalf of one another. Moreover, such responsibilities were to extend beyond the bonds of family and tribe, indeed to “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). These were revolutionary ideas.”

This truth was the inspiration behind Cyprian’s instructions to his flock in Carthage as later described by his biographer, Pontianus:

“The people being assembled together, he first of all urges on them the benefits of mercy. . . . Then he proceeds to add that there is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attentions of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen men or publicans, one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well. . . . Thus, the good was done to all men, not merely to the household of faith.”

This difference in pagan and Christian morality was noticed by the pagans, even by those who hated Christians. Tertullian claimed, “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’”

Even more striking is the testimony of those pagan opponents themselves. Stark relates the account of the Roman Emperor Julian, a bitter opponent of the Christian movement:

“Julian launched a campaign to institute pagan charities in an effort to match the Christians. Julian complained in a letter to the high priest of Galatia in 362 that the pagans needed to equal the virtues of Christians, for recent Christian growth was caused by their “moral character, even if pretended,” and by their “benevolence toward strangers and care for the graves of the dead.” In a letter to another priest, Julian wrote, “I think that when the poor happened to be neglected and overlooked by the priests, the impious Galileans observed this and devoted themselves to benevolence.” And he also wrote, “The impious Galileans support not only their poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.”

Clearly Julian loathed “the Galileans.” He even suspected that their benevolence had ulterior motives. But he recognized that his charities and that of organized paganism paled in comparison.

Lessons to be Learned

As we are confronted by the COVID-19 pandemic, what lessons can we learn from the example of these early Christians?

First, we should face this and every crisis that comes our way with courage. Fear has no place in the life of a believer. We affirm that God is in control. At times like this our actions either demonstrate the sincerity or the falsehood of those declarations. Some marriage vows include the phrase “in sickness or in health.” Our commitment to God demands no less.

By this I don’t discount completely the positive role that fear can play in our lives. If a rabid dog approaches, your fear response to that threat can save your life. What I speak of is the kind of unreasoning, paralyzing, despair-provoking fear that robs us of all hope, peace, and confidence in a future.

Second, COVID-19 does not release us from our obligations as Christ followers. Our discipleship is not contingent upon circumstances. The Golden Rule was not suspended. That means that hoarding or fighting over that last roll of toilet paper at Walmart is not only socially unacceptable behavior, but also blatantly unchristian conduct that must have no part in us. Generosity continues to be an obligation.

Third, the Christian life is one of sacrifice. That goes double in times like these. Christ commands his followers to take up their crosses daily. We must be the ones who set the example for others. We may be called upon to sacrifice our comfort, our personal resources, our money, or maybe even our health and safety.

Fourth, with sacrifice comes an element of risk. We are promised eternal life. We are NOT promised an earthly life free of sickness, discomfort, or pain. Nor are we promised long life on this earth. In fact, sometimes to be obedient to Christ means risking our very lives.

So, as we face this crisis together, we continue to pray. We continue to worship in our churches, in our homes or remotely, via the internet. We do our best to model the kind of prudent actions that our medical authorities have urged us to take. We don’t engage in foolish risks. But protecting ourselves is not an ultimate good. So, if you are qualified to donate blood, for instance, then for the sake of others you assume the small but real element of risk that donating blood entails. The coronavirus is not the only problem that people continue to face today. And those everyday needs must continue to be addressed. People still need their daily bread, and as Christians we may need to take extraordinary actions to help meet those needs.

In recent news there was an example of where a willingness to sacrifice and risk can lead the Christ follower:

An Italian priest died of coronavirus, after giving a respirator that his parishioners bought for him to a younger patient, it has been revealed.

Giuseppe Berardelli, 72, from Casigno in Italy’s hardest-hit Lombardy region, died in a local hospital in recent days after being diagnosed with the virus.

Berardelli had been given a respirator – which were in desperately short supply – by parishioners concerned about his health but decided to give it to a younger patient whom he didn't know but who was struggling to breathe because of the virus. Cyprian and Dionysius would have been proud.

This Pandemic, or the next crisis, can bring the best out in us, and bind us together, instead of tearing us apart. Pastorally this has created and continues to create the most significant challenge for most of our clergy, young and old. I talk to my brothers on an almost daily basis, and am both concerned with and inspired by their effort to "thread the needle" in their very local and varied contexts. The issues of extremely polarized politics, health perspectives, safety perspectives, and many others, are a serious challenge in every Parish and Mission. That being said we all must soldier on and do our best to be true to the "Faith once delivered to the Saints".

General comments on parishes in New York State Deanery: all the parishes are recovering fairly well from the stresses of the pandemic and shutdowns. Attendance is bouncing back, and finances seem to be stable. There are still occasional challenges with some positive COVID cases, but nothing that has shut down the parishes completely. Even fellowship after the liturgy on Sundays, Sunday Schools, Youth and Outreach Ministries are beginning. Each parish has a handful of people that have not returned after the reopening, but catechumens and new attendees seem to be on the rise. All the church buildings, their antimensons, and sacred vessels are in good order, and many renovation projects are being undertaken.

Our focus going forward should be

- Getting people back to Church who stopped attending in person during the pandemic;
- Restarting youth ministries and evangelism ministries that were greatly reduced or ceased during the pandemic;
- Getting people more involved in parish life (or returning to pre-pandemic involvement)

Our Deanery clergy and lay representatives participated monthly in a meeting of Diocesan Council (Via Zoom Conferences and in-person), assisting His Eminence in implementing his vision for our diocese, as well as meetings of Council of Presbyters, Diocesan Court, and meetings of the Chancellors and Deans with Archbishop Michael, to facilitate clergy transfers, filling vacancies, and resolving other administrative, canonical, and legal issues. In spite of challenges of pandemic and closure and slow reopening of our parishes, the deanery continues to be very active and focused on the growth of parishes and missions through ministries, outreach, education and evangelization, though adopting to new tools and methods.

Currently, every parish, mission and institution in the New York State Deanery is being served by full-time priest or covered on a short and long-term basis, when emergencies arise.

We are grateful for the ministry of our deanery Deacons, to whom we express our gratitude for their faithful work: Rev. Protodeacon Andrew Boisvert (Binghamton) and Deacons Michael Burdikoff (Ballston Lake), Mark Bohush (Endicott/Bronxville), Demetrios Richards (Herkimer), Sean McNulty (Rochester), Alexander (Scott) Anderson (Syracuse), David Donch (Auburn), Michael Speck (Auburn), Ivan Bazarov (Lansing), Jason Gagnon (Watervliet), Shawn Karney (Elmira) and Stephan Karlgut (Bronxville).

We want to offer our gratitude to numerous volunteers in our parishes, deanery, and diocese, whose selfless and often unrecognized labors makes all the difference in the life of our communities. Thank-you, and may God bless you!

We want to acknowledge and thank our deanery clergy wives for their quiet support and service, that almost always goes unnoticed and unappreciated. Thank you Matushki and may our loving Lord reward you bountifully for your faith, love, and sacrifices!

Ultimately, we thank His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, for his love, humility, service, and for providing an icon of a true servant leader, during these most challenging times: "Axios! Many years, Vladyko!". Eis polla, eti Despota!

//signed//

Father Alexey Karlgut, Dean New York State Deanery