



March 17, 2020
03/013

To the Venerable Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America,

As is well-known, these recent days have been seemingly unprecedented in the life of the modern world. One would have to go back to the beginning of the twentieth century at the time of the Spanish Influenza pandemic, or the cholera pandemics of the nineteenth century to find something comparable. In these pandemics, millions upon millions of people died. If society has learned anything from the lessons of these pandemics, and also from recent experiences of pandemics like H1N1, MERS, or Zika, it is this: preventative measures are required to limit the effects of a pandemic. In the current crisis, the measures advocated to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus include the maintenance of social distance so as to limit our exposure to the SARS-CoV-2 virus, and thus cut down on the probability of being infected, carrying the virus, and becoming sick from it. Health care professionals speak forcefully about the positive effects that such measures would have, namely, “flattening the curve” of new infections so that our health care system does not become overwhelmed.

We hear this advice, as well as the admonishments to wash our hands frequently, cover our coughs, and keep our Churches clean. Civil authorities are issuing emergency orders to close schools and limit public gatherings. We are also advised to work from home if at all possible. The members of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America have issued statements advising all members of the Church to follow the directives of the Center for Disease Control, and our own further pastoral directives. In our dioceses, we have responded with even further directives that our Churches and institutions should follow. I reiterate here: please become familiar with what the CDC directs, follow our directives, both at the Synodal and at the Diocesan level.

My beloved children in the Lord, none of the measures adopted by any part of the Church should cause scandal or anxiety. They should also not be used as the subject for mockery, vile jokes, sarcasm, or – God forbid! – division or disunity. They have been taken as our Christian response to protect our brothers and sisters. Our Lord tells us, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13).” The life we “laying down” now is our normal life, because these are extraordinary times. We are making a sacrificial effort, which is in keeping with the present season of repentance and ascetical striving. Like the ascetics of old who would depart from their monasteries for the forty days of Lent in preparation for Holy Week, we should take this opportunity to prayerfully reflect on our life in Christ and increase our desire to be with Him.

No one should feel any concern about the canonical implications of being absent from the divine services. We find ourselves in extraordinary circumstances that require extraordinary, but *temporary* responses. The holy body and precious blood of our Lord can never be a source of disease, it is after all for the healing of soul and body, but the COVID-19 virus can still be passed through the congregation. Out of love for our

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neighbor, we must do everything we can to protect the vulnerable by slowing the rate of infection not only in our parishes, but in the greater community, and thereby allowing the hospitals and medical community to more adequately care for those most at risk.

I call on the faithful of the Orthodox Church in America to make good use of this time and renew their faith and hope in God through prayer and fasting, and by being of service to their brothers and sisters. The exhortation of the great Prophet Isaiah should guide us. He called out to the ancient people of Israel “If you take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,” in other words, if we stay united, relieve one another of the burdens that this virus has placed on us, “if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday (Isaiah 58.10).” In the darkness of anxiety and sickness, in the gloom of the disruption of our lives, these words of the prophet point us to the True Light, Jesus Christ, the great Physician and Healer of our souls and bodies, who gave his life for us so that we might live with Him eternally.

May our Lord Jesus Christ, who is blessed eternally with the Heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit preserve us in these days and grant us health and his peace.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a cross symbol followed by stylized cursive letters that appear to read 'Tikhon'.

+TIKHON
Archbishop of Washington
Metropolitan of All America and Canada
Locum Tenes of the New England,
and the Albanian Archdiocese