

His Eminence
The Most Reverend
Metropolitan JOSEPH



Archbishop of New York and
Metropolitan of
All North America

ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE
OF NORTH AMERICA

March 6, 2020

Beloved Clergy,

Greetings and blessings to you, your families, and your flocks during these holy days of the Great Fast!

We are receiving calls and emails asking for guidance from the Archdiocese in the wake of the spread of the novel coronavirus around the world and its appearance in North America.

First of all, as clergy, our duty is to pray fervently for our people and the world that God will “turn away and dispel all wrath stirred up against us and all sickness.” We comfort our people and turn them towards faith in God and trust in His Holy Will. We call them to embrace this time of repentance, reconciliation, and prayer offered to us by the Fast. We should also find courage in the example of one of our righteous priests, Fr. Nicola Yanney, who heroically refused to neglect his duty to visit his sick parishioners during the Spanish flu epidemic, eventually contracting it himself and dying what we can consider a martyric death. While taking necessary precautions, we still visit our sick and dying.

As far as guidance about limiting the spread of the virus, we will not change our way of distributing the Holy Mysteries. This matter is closed to any debate or discussion. Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is without any question or doubt the Medicine of Immortality, not a source of disease. The Church, over her two-thousand-year history, has experienced countless plagues and has never wavered on this point, and we will not do so now. While we can point to scientific studies that show the Common Cup has never been shown to be a transmitter of infectious diseases, this is ultimately a matter of faith, and you are to work through your preaching and teaching to increase this faith in our people.

There are common sense precautions we can take in doing our part to work with the civil authorities in containing the virus. Of course, we should encourage people who are sick or have been in contact with someone who is infected to remain home and

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call their healthcare provider if they show symptoms of COVID-19. We should stress proper hygiene and handwashing, coughing and sneezing into the crooks of our elbows or a tissue, and we most certainly must practice these things ourselves. We can also advise people to limit hugging, kissing, and handshaking. If your parishioners offer a kiss of peace during Liturgy, they may simply bow to one another.

Regarding the veneration of crosses and icons, we ask that you ensure that objects for veneration are cleaned thoroughly at least before and after each service. We also advise adopting the age-old Orthodox custom of the priest offering antidoron instead of offering the cross for veneration – this will keep everyone from placing their own hands in the basket of bread. Be sure to sanitize your hands before and after. Finally, you should work with your parish council to ensure that the coffee hours and potlucks – which ironically no one has asked us about! – are practicing very strict rules of hygiene and cleanliness.

This is a rapidly evolving situation, and we are doing our absolute best to stay well-informed and in touch with experts, and we will provide any additional updates as events unfold. Please visit this resource provided by the CDC on recommendations for readying religious communities for this new coronavirus. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>

From the Office of His Eminence Metropolitan JOSEPH

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