



THE DIOCESE OF THE SOUTH

Orthodox Church in America

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COVID-19 Guidance for the Clergy and Faithful of the Diocese of the South

12 March 2020

The Second Week of Great Lent

From the **Life of St. Mary of Egypt**: *On the Sunday which customarily gives its name to the first week of Lent, the divine liturgy was performed as usual, with each monk participating in the undefiled and life-giving sacraments; and then, according to custom, they partook of a small portion of food. Afterwards they all gathered in the chapel and, after long prayers and many genuflections, the monks kissed each other and each one embraced the father superior. Then they made obeisance and asked for his blessing, so that they would have it with them as an experienced fellow combatant in their forthcoming spiritual struggle. After these proceedings, the gate of the monastery was opened and all the monks came out singing in unison, "The Lord is my light and my Savior, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?,"³³ and the rest of the psalm. Often they left one or two monks behind to guard the monastery, not to guard what was stored inside (for there was nothing that could be taken away easily by thieves), but so that the chapel might not be left without ministry.*

Beloved, along with diocesan administration, I have been closely monitoring the developing status of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past 48 hours it has become clear that if we do not slow the rate of infection through social distancing (i.e., self-imposed isolation) our healthcare system is likely to be overwhelmed by the number of cases. As we can see from the situation in Italy, this will result in a significantly greater number of deaths, due to lack of treatment, or rather the inability to effectively treat so great a number of those infected. Further, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests COVID-19 is an airborne contagion that cannot be contained simply by the reasonable hygienic measures with which we are all familiar (handwashing, disinfecting of surfaces, and the like).

In light of this, I am asking all parishes and missions in the Diocese of the South, in addition to the directives from the Statement of the Holy Synod, to respond in the following manner:

- All parish and mission events and activities, including coffee fellowship, church school, and the rest, and all services other than the Sunday Liturgy of St. Basil the Great, the Vespereal Liturgy of the Great Feast of Annunciation, and the Presanctified Liturgies, are cancelled through March 29, beginning from today. At which point we will adjust this as the situation warrants.
- Everyone in the parish or mission, other than the priest (and deacon), a reader, a server, and no more than two (2) chanters or singers (all of whom are physically strong and at low risk for COVID-19), should remain at home, even at the time of the Divine Liturgy. 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 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

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community, and thereby allowing the hospitals and medical community to more adequately care for those most at risk. All who are “at risk” – the elderly, those with pre-existing conditions, any who are actively sick or exhibiting signs of illness – should absolutely absent themselves from the services.

- Priests are instructed to commemorate all of the faithful on the diskos at the proskomedia (as I presume is your practice, regardless).
- If possible, the service should be webcast on the internet so that the faithful may participate in the prayers, which are themselves a source of grace and consolation. Every effort should be made to provide the faithful with the service texts.
- The clergy are to either:
 1. Include the OCA’s petition or prayer in your services, or add into the Great and Augmented Litanies the special petitions from the Molieben in Times of Pestilence (GB of N, vol. IV, pg. 93-94, and 111-112 respectively). In our prayers we should especially remember health-care workers. They are going to bear a heavy burden during this time of trial.
 2. Offer the Molieben entirely following the Divine Liturgy.
- Clergy are reminded that they have the primary responsibility of visiting the sick, but should take care not to expose the faithful and others to the virus.

This is not the season of Great Lent we anticipated, but it is nonetheless a fitting Lenten effort: focus on the greater good of our neighbors, recognizing that this initial response to this pandemic will work for the greater good of our faithful and our neighbors. Use this time of “social distancing” for prayer and to keep vigil “in one’s cell.”

Please continue to work through your dean and diocesan leadership to address any particular concerns not covered here, and I will let you know of further directives.

Wishing you strength for the weeks ahead, and assuring you of my prayers,



+ALEXANDER
Bishop of Dallas and the South

