

## Pastoral letter regarding the coronavirus pandemic

St Nicholas Orthodox Church, McKinney Texas. 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of Great Lent, March 1/14, 2020

Dear Faithful in Christ: In this letter I will tell you the response of our diocese and church to the Corona virus pandemic, and how our schedule and routines will be affected. First, I ask you to read a few paragraphs that are very important.

An Orthodox Christian should be *most* afraid of *not* repenting from sin. Sin weakens the soul and invariably leads to more sin. This is our greatest fear: that we somehow become habitual in our sin and lose grace. Regarding things that may or may not happen tomorrow, the Scripture is very clear: to fear the future is a sign of lack of faith and is a sin. The Lord told us that tomorrow has enough troubles of its own, and that we should believe that our Heavenly Father will help us.

Many are afraid because of the corona virus pandemic. Do not be afraid! If all you are doing is being afraid, then you are not being a Christian. Even if you do not think you are afraid but you are not also praying in addition to changing your lifestyle because of this virus, you are not being a Christian. If we are afraid, we must pray. If we are not afraid, we must pray because we love our brother and we don't want anyone to come to any harm. If you are not praying, then you are sinning. This is the most important thing.

We will not stop serving the services unless our bishop orders us to do so. **There is no change to our church schedule.** We will still have trapeza and church school. I will still conduct catechism class on Saturday. Services will continue on our normal days of Saturday, and Sunday, Monday morning, and Wednesday evening, and any other days that might be scheduled because of the church calendar. See <http://www.orthodox.net/calendar>.

As Christians, our citizenship is in heaven and yet we are also citizens in society in which we live. Therefore, we will be good citizens and obey a letter Archbishop Peter has written, which directs us to follow the precautions that the civil authorities have recommended. None of these precautions go against our prayer and our faith.

The following are mandatory guidelines for parishes, monasteries, and all diocesan institutions in the Diocese of Chicago & Mid-America, ROCOR. These were approved by His Eminence Archbishop Peter March 1/14, 2020 and are in force immediately. ([https://www.chicagodiocese.org/news\\_200314\\_1](https://www.chicagodiocese.org/news_200314_1))

1. The seriousness and risk of this outbreak should not be underestimated. We all have a moral obligation to take what steps we can to reduce the spread of infection. If too many people get sick at the same time the hospitals will be overwhelmed and the death rate will increase. Our actions to slow the spread of the disease will save lives.

2. The best step everyone can take is to practice social distancing. Everyone in church should keep a distance from everyone else – ideally about 6 feet (2 meters). *[Note (from FS): Clearly, in our church all of us cannot stand 6 feet apart from each other. Everyone understands this, including Archbishop Peter, and we should do the best we can. Let's not obsess about this. Basically, stand in family groups as much as possible, understanding of course the children will wander a bit, and as much as possible do not stand shoulder to shoulder. This is an opportunity for some*

*people to stand much closer to the front of the church. This may give you the opportunity to hear prayers that are being said by the priest which normally cannot be heard in the back of the church.]*

3. Anyone over the age of 70 should very seriously consider staying home, since they are at a much higher risk of death from coronavirus. Anyone who shows symptoms, or was exposed to an infected person, or is infirm should stay home. Arrangement can be made for clergy to provide confession and communion to the infirm and those choosing to stay at home.

4. Sanitizer and additional handwashing stations should be readily available.

5. During this time, the faithful are not obligated to kiss a priest's hand when receiving a blessing.

6. The faithful should not feel that they must kiss public icons. At the same time, we should keep in mind that all icons are miraculous, and that many martyrs died in the struggle with iconoclasm and that we, as Orthodox Christians hold icons in high esteem. Each of the faithful may decide, during this time of pandemic, how best to approach this question.

7. Parishioners should not shake hands or hug.

8. Only antidorion will be provided after communion. Wine will not be provided. This is the Greek custom, and is perfectly suited to adaptation in our parishes.

9. Clergy visiting the elderly and sick must be especially cautious not to become a vector for transmission. Clergy should bring their own masks and sanitizer. If possible, they should provide masks for the sick to wear, so that the cleric is at a reduced risk of infection.

10. Clergy and parishioners who have been exposed must self-quarantine for fourteen days.

11. Each parish should increase the frequency and visibility of their cleaning regime both during and outside the times of the Divine Services. (end of letter)

We must be sober regarding this problem. Running to the store and buying every loaf of bread you can find is hoarding, and it is a sin. Other people need that bread and if you hoard that bread, you might snatch some of that bread out of children's mouths. This is especially a great sin for an Orthodox Christian during Great Lent, when we should be fasting and not be fixating on the needs of our bodies. Of course, if you run out of bread and you need more for your family it is not a sin to purchase it. Recently, I read an account about a large American city where people were not only stripping the shelves bare, but were also stealing food from other people's carts. This is acting like animals and not like human beings.

Make sure to pray, and be calm, and obey the directives of our bishop. He has not told us to change the services one iota. Therefore, we will not do this. There is more risk in going to the store or work or being on a train than there is going to church. When you go to the store you encounter almost any kind of person, and many more people than you would encounter in church. Let's have some perspective here.

Of course, we know that the Holy Mysteries do not communicate disease, however, of course, people can communicate disease. We also must be aware that the world is watching us.

I don't recommend that anyone sequester themselves in their home because of fear. If you are afraid, this is an opportunity for you to step out in faith. I will say this plainly to you. If you continue to go to work and do other social things, and stay home from church, then you have a lack of faith that you must address.

If anyone decides to stay home from church because they are fearful of contracting the corona virus, or for any other reason, they should contact me (or Father Nicholas) and we will give you instructions for how to pray on Saturday and Sunday. We always do things decently and in good order. It is not in good order just to stay home and not pray.

Please say the Troparia and Kontakion to St Nikephorus daily. I published it in two languages. I understand that this is an extra thing for you to do, but according to your strength, I think you can do it. It literally takes less than a minute to read the prayers.

If you have the strength, it would be good to say a prayer rope every day, for those afflicted by the virus and that God would save us from any more spread of the pandemic. Likewise, it would be good to assign yourself a number of prostrations, being reasonable with yourself. Very few of us can do hundred prostrations in a row, but perhaps some of us can do 10, or 3. If you decide to do this, then you can just say a simple prayer such as "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on us ". You do not need to go in great detail about the particulars of this virus, since God knows everything. If you feel more comfortable, you can craft a prayer that is short about the virus. You could say something like "Lord Jesus Christ, save us from the corona virus ".

We will also say the prayers entreating the Lord to save us from pestilence and plague in the services.

Be careful that your faith does not offend another person's faith. Many people have different opinions about this virus and are encountering this virus in a different way. Some are extremely fearful. Some believe that they must stay home because of the danger of the virus spreading. Some will decide not to kiss the icons or will not kiss the hand of the priest. We should not judge anyone for this.

The only person you should judge is yourself and that is for one thing: if you react to this virus like much of the world is reacting, with fear and panic, but do not pray about it.

In Christ, your unworthy pastor, and one who daily prays his small prayers for you:

Priest Seraphim Holland

**This Letter:**

[http://www.orthodox.net/articles/pastoral-letter-corona-virus-02\\_2020-03-14.pdf](http://www.orthodox.net/articles/pastoral-letter-corona-virus-02_2020-03-14.pdf)

[http://www.orthodox.net/articles/pastoral-letter-corona-virus-02\\_2020-03-14.doc](http://www.orthodox.net/articles/pastoral-letter-corona-virus-02_2020-03-14.doc)

**St Nikephorus Troparia and Kontakia:**

<http://www.orthodox.net/articles/prayer-to-nikephoros-the-leper-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic.pdf>

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