



**GUIDELINES REGARDING COVID-19
FOR CLERGY, MONASTICS, AND FAITHFUL OF THE
DIOCESE OF EASTERN AMERICA OF THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH**

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**To our Beloved Clergy, Monastics and Faithful
of the God-protected Diocese of Eastern America of the Serbian Orthodox Church**

Today, the President of the United States of America, Donald Trump, has declared, *until further notice*, a **NATIONAL EMERGENCY** in the United States of America with regard to **COVID-19**, which according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is now a pandemic.

COVID-19, referred to as Corona Disease 2019, or simply “Coronavirus”, continues to spread, causing fear and anxiety within society at large and our own communities of faith. Presently in the United States, escalating precautions are being made, as in other parts of the world. Notwithstanding, it is important that our parish communities, clergy and their faithful, do all that is within ***faith and reason*** to maintain the safety of our parishes and those who worship therein.

At this time, we know of one confirmed case of the Coronavirus among the faithful of our parishes. It concerns a young family, father, mother and two little children that have been afflicted with the virus. Therefore, we urge you to follow personal hygiene precautions and exercise social distancing measures as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and local health authorities.

Many of our faithful are concerned about **fasting**, especially during this period of Great and Holy Lent, as well as the reception of **Holy Communion**, both according to our Holy Orthodox Christian Tradition. The answer to such concerns can only be understood through the Great Mystery of the Incarnation of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. As such, in Him we are already healed, and continually being healed through receiving Holy Communion, the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

Many fear that fasting will weaken the body and make a person more susceptible to disease—we believe this is unfounded. Fasting is a source of relief for the human body, as it frees us from overly rich foods, which can inhibit the process of healing. It is well-documented that an integral part of Byzantine holistic healing, which was also used in Medieval Serbia, and is presently being rediscovered and incorporated into what is now known as “vegan” meals as part of physical healing.

Through faith, we do not believe anyone has ever, nor do we believe they can, become sick through receiving Holy Communion. As this is a matter of faith, the manner in which we receive Holy Communion will not be changed. Precautionary measures are, however, permitted according to the Holy Canons of the Orthodox Church through *economia* (The Rudder, Canon 28 of the Penthekti Council, and as approved by the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church No. 2579/1927. Min. 166/1928 15/28. II. 1928). Faith is the only antidote to fear.

Our Holy Patriarch Pavle reminded us of the following: "If infectious diseases could spread through Communion, then the majority of clergy (who consume the Chalice after everyone has communed), especially those physically weaker, would be ailing from a wide variety of infectious diseases and many would have died long ago. However, reality indicates something entirely different."

The tenets of our faith admonish us to approach all such matters synergistically. Concerned faithful, especially vulnerable individuals, should consult with their parish priest and health professionals, incorporating **faith and reason**, including medical science, for appropriate measures. In all matters concerned, let us not judge others, based on their fears, or their actions as a result of consultation with their parish priest and medical professional.

Our parish churches and monasteries will remain open for the celebration of liturgical services, most especially the Divine Liturgy. Our **faith** must be accompanied by **God-endowed reason**, wherein we can and must take certain precautionary and common-sense measures, *albeit temporarily*, to prevent the spread of the virus:

- In an emergency call 9-1-1;
- Anyone, clergy, monastics and laity alike, exhibiting the symptoms of Coronavirus (i.e. fever, cough, shortness of breath, and other symptoms that may be published by medical authorities) should immediately seek medical attention and self-quarantine for the recommended period of fourteen (14) days, and wait until afebrile without medication for a full 24 hours before returning to the community;
- Our parish and monastery complexes should be maintained using enhanced sanitization and hygiene protocols as recommended by authorities, which includes increased vigorous custodial cleaning of the entire church facility and the availability of hand sanitizer dispensers at all entrances, in the narthex, common areas, elevators, and so forth;
- Clergy, monastics and faithful, should thoroughly and frequently wash their hands, cover their coughs and sneezes with disposable tissues, and avoid sharing personal items, especially altar servers when cutting the liturgical bread (antidoron, or *naphora*);
- Choirs and cantors should also exercise extra precautionary measures. Choir members are asked to mark their sanitized music books with their names and take them home with them, so that they do not unintentionally become a vehicle for the transmission of the virus;
- Clergy and church caretakers should see to the routine cleaning and sanitizing of liturgical objects and frequently touched surfaces such as icons, glass coverings, blessing crosses, and increased prescribed washing of chalices, communion spoons, communion cloths, and the like;
- Holy Communion will be received by the faithful, as is customary, from the chalice with a liturgical spoon, however, *at this time*, no one is to close their mouth on the spoon;
- In greeting one another and during concelebrations, the traditional three-fold Kiss of Peace is not to be exchanged, rather everyone is requested to simply bow

respectfully one to another, and faithful are to refrain, *at this time*, from kissing the hands of celebrants and when asking for blessings;

- All liturgical handbooks and the like that are located in the pews are to be removed at this time and until further notice;
- Collection plates/baskets are not to be passed, rather put next to the central icon for receiving donations;
- Following the conclusion of Liturgy, the cross is not to be offered for veneration, the faithful should simply make the sign of the cross before the icon, bow their heads respectfully and continue to receive the liturgical bread (antidoron, or *naphora*) from the hands of the celebrant, who will have, once again, thoroughly washed or sanitized his hands before distributing the bread;
- Regarding any uncertainties, especially in areas where the virus is discovered, your Diocesan Bishop must be notified immediately and consulted for Archpastoral blessings to adopt additional *temporary* measures to prevent the spread of disease at liturgical gatherings; and
- Our communities and organizations should shut down all non-liturgical activities, such as folklore, Church and Serbian school classes and social events (i.e. coffee hours, luncheons, brunches, dinner, meetings, etc.), until further notice. It is incumbent upon church boards to review the federal and state laws, rules and regulations of their jurisdictions and follow them.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services has advised that the most prudent actions that individuals and communities can take, in addition to what is noted above, are to be found at the website of the CDC Resources for Community and Faith-Based Leaders, see:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/organizations/index.html>.

Finally, it is incumbent upon us to pray that our Lord, the Great Physician of our souls and bodies, will comfort and aid those already affected by the virus, and grant strength and wisdom to those working to combat and control the virus. We must also pray that we do not inadvertently isolate or stigmatize any afflicted members of our communities. In our common effort, we must always be united in purpose, and care for those who in need, as we are all responsible for each other. For the Church heals not only with what it says, but what it is—a community of love.

These directives are to be posted on all church websites and distributed through all social media and parish mailing, electronic, or otherwise.

With Archpastoral blessings and Paternal love,

Bishop of Eastern America

