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Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America – Encyclical of His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph regarding COVID-19



His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph of New York and all North America of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of North America has released the following Encyclical regarding the COVID-19 outbreak. Read the full text below:

Beloved in Christ,

Greetings and blessings to all of you in the Name of our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ!

During these holy days of Lent – this time of fasting, prayer, and repentance – we are preparing ourselves to commemorate the Life-giving and Saving Passion of our Lord and His Glorious Third-day Resurrection.

On the night our Lord was betrayed, He gathered His disciples in the Upper Room to strengthen them in their Faith before the coming trials and tribulations. While speaking plainly about the suffering that was to take place, He said to them encouragingly: “In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Our Lenten journey this year has the added trial of the worldwide spread of a novel coronavirus. This virus has landed on the shores of our North American continent and begun its spread into various cities within the boundaries of our Archdiocese. As our Lord strengthened the courage of His disciples before His Passion, He is calling us to faith and courage today. We are hearing the warnings that the spread of the disease will quicken without more dramatic measures, and we need to say honestly that we could be entering into a time of significant trial. As Orthodox Christians, we should remind ourselves that in the world we will always have tribulation.

We must all decide what we will do during this time. Will we panic and become paralyzed with fear? Or will we recall the words of our Lord that despite this time of trial, we can take heart that He has indeed overcome the world? Even in the face of sickness and death, we as Orthodox Christians are called to remember that the Tomb is empty, for our Christ has shattered the gates of death and opened Paradise to all. We celebrate the death of death and ask: “Oh, death where is thy sting? Oh, hades where is they victory?”

Having said that, I would like to offer a few words about the seriousness of the threat we face. I have heard some of our clergy and faithful downplaying the threat by saying things that may be factually true but can also be misleading. Yes, the disease COVID-19 will only have mild symptoms in the vast majority of cases. Yes, the seasonal flu has at this point caused considerably more deaths during this flu season than COVID-19. Yes, most Americans are still considered to have low degree of risk of contracting the coronavirus. However, the daunting problem we are facing is one of avoiding the spike in cases that could easily happen without taking serious precautions. As we have seen in other countries, the virus can spread quickly, and if even a small percentage of people require hospitalization, our hospitals will be overrun.

On the same night before His Passion, the Lord asked His disciples: “to

love one another as I have loved you.” We know that people who are older and have underlying health problems are the most susceptible to having a serious illness develop from COVID-19. We must remember that although the vast majority of us may have only a mild illness if infected, our own careless spread of the virus could result in the unnecessary hospitalizations and deaths of many of our vulnerable brothers and sisters. We have to show our Christian love by cooperating with our civil authorities to do what can be done to protect them.

We have been in touch with epidemiologists and civic leaders to do our part in containing the spread of the virus. Last week, we sent directives to our clergy based on the advice we had received at the time. We also cautioned that we were dealing with a rapidly evolving situation that will require us to update the directive as we receive new information and guidance.

As we have heard many times now, all of us need to adopt extremely good hygiene practices – frequent hand washing, cleaning often-touched surfaces, sneezing and coughing into our elbows, and limiting hugs, kisses, and handshakes. The sick need to stay home and contact their healthcare providers if they show symptoms of COVID-19. The elderly and vulnerable need to severely limit their travel and exposure to crowded places. Anyone who can work from home is encouraged to do so. Our priests and parish councils were instructed to take necessary precautions to limit the spread of this virus in our parishes last week.

We are now entering a time where we will be asked more and more by the civil authorities to engage in social distancing and cut down on unnecessary travel and events. We can expect that there will different levels of these requests in different areas of the country – depending on the severity of local outbreaks – so we will respond as the situation dictates. In the spirit of love for our vulnerable neighbors and service to our communities, I am instructing our clergy and parishes to abide by the directives of their local civil authorities.

In this same spirit, we will postpone all events and retreats on the deanery and diocesan level through the end of this month. We do not want any unnecessary travel at this critical juncture. In fact, we have already postponed two Lenten retreats of the Dioceses of the East that were to take place at the Antiochian Village in the coming weeks. After

this Sunday, we ask that our parishes postpone any non-worship event that would bring together more than 100 people. We will leave it up to the discretion of the pastor, in consultation with the local bishop, to cancel Sunday School, coffee hour, potlucks, etc. due to the proximity of each parish to areas of outbreak and the advice of the local authorities.

To be clear, we will not stop the liturgical life of our parishes unless specifically ordered to do so by the local authorities. We need the prayer of the Church and the Holy Mysteries. As I instructed our clergy last week, 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.

Beloved in Christ, I ask of all of us to increase the fervency of our prayers to Almighty God. Our Lord also spoke on that fateful night of the greatest love we can offer, the love of one who lays down his or her life for another. Our health care workers, first responders, and clergy will be asked to courageously put themselves in harm's way to care for and minister to the sick, and they need our prayers and support. We must pray to God to grant wisdom and discernment to the civil authorities of our land. We must pray for the sick and their loved ones. We must use this holy season to repent and grow to love God and our neighbor more fully.

We are likely entering into a time of trial. We pray that the measures we are taking in conjunction with the civil authorities will slow the spread of the virus in our communities. We pray that our Lord, the Physician and Healer of our souls and bodies, will look down on our world with mercy and compassion and speedily deliver us from this pestilence. We also pray that He will grant to all of us faith and love, courage and strength, wisdom and discernment to do our part – each and every one of us. We have the assurance of our Faith, that in the end, our Lord has overcome the world.

With paternal love and prayers and for all of you, I remain,

Your Father in Christ,

+JOSEPH

Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of all North America