16/03/2020

We advise our faithful, during this critical time, not to attend church services



MAKARIOS
by God’s mercy, Archbishop of the Most Holy Archdiocese of Australia, Primate and Exarch of All Oceania, to the God-loving Bishops, the gracious clergy and monastic brotherhoods, and to all the Christ-loving plenitude of the Orthodox Church in Australia, grace and peace from our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Venerable Brother fellow Bishops and my beloved children,

Given the worldwide concern, fear and panic that is prevailing upon all humanity due to Covid-19 (Corona-virus), but also the recent local outbreaks and manifestation in Australia, and taking into consideration the inspired Communiqué of the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate on this matter, together with the directives of the Australian Government, I paternally urge everyone to comply with the following guidelines:

Since many Christians are asking if the virus is transmitted through Holy Communion, I responsibly assure every faithful person that up until now in the history of our Church there have never been any cases where an epidemic of infectious disease has been transmitted through Holy Communion.

However, the Holy Archdiocese of Australia understands the reservations and insecurities of some people, who refrain from receiving Holy Communion out of a fear that this will cause the transmission of the virus. All those who abstain from receiving Holy Communion during this period of crisis, are certainly not considered to be indifferent to, or opponents of, the faith and the Church. We understand their position and do not desire that, under any circumstances, they fill their conscience with feelings of guilt. Besides, the spiritual life is about freedom without force, it leads to internal joy and peace of the soul only when it has nothing to do with situations that give rise to coercion and pressure.

What we must emphasise, however, is that according to scientists, the transmission of the virus occurs when we are in close contact with a person who is infected. Therefore, when someone is in Church, even if they have not received Holy Communion, they are in serious danger of contracting the disease and, at the same time, of transmitting this virus to their close family members as well as to other people around them.

For this reason, we advise our faithful, during this critical time, not to attend any events where many people gather, including church services. This measure ensures that the entire community remains safe and protected. This guideline is directed to all people; to those who are older and those who are younger and particularly to vulnerable groups of people who constitute a significant portion of our churchgoers.

Turning to our priests and the Committees of the larger parishes that gather more than 500 people during the Holy Services, I urge you not to hesitate to close the doors of Churches before this maximum number is reached. On the part of the Archdiocese, this will not cause any type of displeasure or sanction. This is the directive of the Australian Government and I urge our God-loving bishops and priests to respect this with complete sacredness.

Amongst other things, I ask our priests not to give their hand to be kissed even

when they hand out the antidoron. If a person carrying the virus kisses the priest's hand and other faithful follow, then the hand will become a source of infection and the means of transmission of the virus and, instead of giving a blessing it will offer great pain. This measure concerns not only the protection of the priest himself, but also, and more so, the protection of the faithful. On this matter, we received the advice of specialist doctors who urge us not to leave the antidoron on a table for each person to take by themselves. The many hands which will touch the antiodoron cannot ensure conditions that will maintain health. For this reason, according to the specialists, because it is safer for the antidoron to be distributed by one person, we ask priests to assume this responsibility, but, as we have already clarified, without the kissing of the hand.

Within the same spirit, I urge and plead with our faithful to restrict the number of people participating in Sacraments and funerals. They are to occur only with close and immediate family members. As for the Services of Holy Week, specific instructions will be issued several days earlier, according to to the information that we will have at the time.

At the same time, I inform the people of our Church that from today and up until 3rd of April, the offices of the Holy Archdiocese of Australia in Sydney, as well as the other local Archdiocesan Districts, will operate from 10am until 12pm so that only necessary services can be given to the faithful. Moreover, all classes at St Andrew's Theological College will be offered online. Our resident students were encouraged to return to their homes.

My dear friends in Christ,

When we overlook the dangers that result from such a pandemic disease affecting public health, either through our indifference or in the name of any religious conviction, then we are committing a deadly sin. God is not to be tested nor mocked. For this reason, I sincerely request that our gracious clergy and Christ-loving people rise to the occasion, on the one hand without fear and panic, but also with responsibility and ecclesial seriousness.

In this same spirit of responsibility and love towards our flock, I ask that you do not compare circumstances and measures of other Metropolitinates with our local Church. In Europe, for example, 3 Metropolitanates suspended all services within their Churches. This measure, however, arose as a result of regulations and measures of the State which did not only concern the Orthodox Church but also the Churches of other Christian denominations and religions. I urge the clergy and the Christ-loving people to have faith in the Government leaders and in our local Church, whose view is expressed through its Archbishop and the Press Office of the Holy Archdiocese of Australia.

The advice from scientists is that we can help Australia suppress the rapid spread

of COVID-19 if we act immediately and quickly. We highly bless those who are working tirelessly to discover a cure, or who care for those who have been diagnosed with the virus. We also wholeheartedly thank all those who are following the recommendations of the authorities to help stem the spread of the virus.
I am certain that all of us will increase our prayers to God so that a cure can be quickly found for this trial that has beset our planet. Please be assured that in cooperation with our clergy and the governing authorities of this nation, we are closely monitoring the situation and, if there are any changes, we will communicate these with you.
I thank and congratulate everybody for their understanding and cooperation and I pray that we have a good remainder of Holy and Great Lent.

With much love in Christ and with fervent paternal prayers
In Sydney, on the 15th day of March, 2020
Your Archbishop

† MAKARIOS of Australia