27/03/2020

Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America – Pastoral Letter from H.E. Metropolitan Joseph regarding COVID-19



March 24, 2020

Beloved Faithful in Christ,

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

As I celebrated liturgy Sunday with a small number of my staff here at our headquarters chapel of St. John Chrysostom, I could not help but feel a profound heaviness of heart. During this time of social distancing, I know we all feel the pain of being separated from one another. I was heartbroken to think of our clergy processing with the Life-giving Cross of Christ in the absence of our faithful and distributing the precious Body and Blood of our Master only to those needed to serve and chant the services.

Beloved in Christ, my heart suffers with you. These decisions have been among the most painful I have ever had to make in my many years of ministry. Please know

that our directives of the past few weeks have been made with prayer, thoughtfulness, and care. We will continue to reassess our policies as this situation progresses, and I ask your fervent prayers that the Lord will grant to me and my brother hierarchs here and throughout the world the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – that our decisions may be made with divine wisdom and discernment.

We will soon draw to a close the fifteen-day period that we were asked to join in cooperation with our fellow citizens. We will be studying updated information from our parishes, civil authorities, and advisors in the fields of health and epidemiology in order to communicate next week our directives for Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Pascha. At the same time, I have been in touch with the Department of Convention and Conference Planning, and unfortunately, we decided to cancel the parish life conferences this summer as we need time to cancel contracts with the various hotels. We have yet to make determinations about our summer camps and the clergy symposium, keeping hope we may still turn a corner in mitigating the outbreak, and we let you know as soon as we have enough information to make informed decisions.

In the reading of the Synaxarion this past Sunday, we learn of the reason we celebrate the Cross at the midpoint of Lent: “Having arrived with God’s grace at the middle of the Fast, our compassionate Mother—the Holy Orthodox Church—thought fit to reveal to us the Holy Cross as the joy of the world and power of the faithful to help us carry on the struggles of the divine Fast.” Our struggles during this Lent have been so much more than depriving ourselves of certain foods or increasing our attendance at church services. This year, we cannot take for granted that what we need will be at the grocery store, and we must attend the services virtually over the internet. Our Lenten cross feels so much heavier.

Yet, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, when our earthly crosses seem the heaviest, that is precisely when we must turn to the “joy of the world” – the precious Cross of the Lord. We may be tempted during this time of pandemic to think about our Lenten disciplines as somehow trying to assuage a vengeful god who is pouring his wrath upon us – as the pagans did of old. When we see the Cross, however, we call to mind that our Christ became man, uniting Himself to our suffering even unto death itself. To the extent that what is happening in this world is a call from God to repentance, it is a call from a Loving God to love more, to serve more, and to forgive more. The way of the Cross can seem to be a daunting one – especially in these anxious days – but the Lord promised that taking up our crosses and following Him would grant us not just life, but abundant life.

If we use these days of trial to take up the Cross, our weapon of peace and

invincible trophy, perhaps we will see the ways in which our lives had an abundance of things but not an abundance of life. Perhaps, we can get to know our families in a deeper way that we now have more time to cultivate. Perhaps, we can develop a deeper relationship with God, the All-Holy Theotokos, and the Saints. Perhaps our homes will become little churches in a way that will continue even after we return to our normal liturgical life. In these ways, perhaps we may find that God has allowed these temporary worldly restrictions to grant us a new spiritual abundance going forward to eternal life.

Amidst the sadness of these days, I have taken heart in the beautiful ways our clergy and laity have begun to use the technology of our time to connect with one another with online liturgical services and educational offerings. I thank from the bottom of my heart all of the clergy and laity who have worked so hard and with such speed to make these things possible. I found refreshment in the mid-point of Lent in not only the power of the Cross but in the power God has shown forth through each and every one of you.

Once again, I call on each one of us to raise our fervent prayers to the Lord for the brave nurses, doctors, and first responders answering the call to serve in these challenging times. I call on you to pray for the healing of the souls and bodies of all of the sick and for the Lord to strengthen them and their loved ones. We must also pray for our civil authorities that the Lord will guide them in their difficult decisions and speak peace in their hearts concerning the Church and His people. Remember, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, no power on earth can stop us from prayer, and it is our responsibility to offer our heartfelt prayers on behalf of all. May our Lord continue to strengthen you and all of your loved ones as we continue this challenging Lenten journey.

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

Your Father in Christ,

+JOSEPH
Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of all North America