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Archbishop Elpidophoros Holds Virtual Town Hall with National Clergy on Pandemic Crisis – Briefs Clergy on his Call with Secretary Azar



On March 28, 2020, His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America held a Virtual Town Hall with the Metropolitans of the Eparchial Synod, the Bishops, and over 325 members of the National Clergy, organized by the Archdiocese Presbyters Council (APC), in order to discuss the magnitude of the Pandemic crisis and took questions from the clergy.

The Archbishop briefed the clergy on last night's discussion that he had with Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar, where they identified two areas in which the Church can especially assist the wider community of each parish:

1) Organize support around the families of doctors, nurses and health care workers who now have to spend time away from their homes.

2) Organize support to provide meals and nutrition to children experiencing scarcity.

Speaking to the Secretary, the Archbishop said: "Mr. Secretary, the Headquarters

of the Archdiocese is at the epicenter of the crisis, but please remember that we are a nationwide Church. We are here to help and we will help. I pray that God will continue to give strength and courage to you in your efforts and to the heroic doctors and healthcare professionals who are saving lives every day."

In the course of the call with the APC, His Eminence updated the clergy on the tools and practical solutions that the Archdiocese is providing, and pastoral guidelines that apply during this pandemic.

His Eminence's opening remarks to the clergy can be found below:

> His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros
> Archdiocese Presbyters Council Virtual Town Hall
> March 28, 2020
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> Archdiocese Headquarters
> New York, New York
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> Your Eminences and Graces,
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> Beloved Brothers in the Lord,
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> I greet each and every one of you in the love of Christ and with my deep appreciation for all that you are doing for the Faithful during this global pandemic. We have all been caught off guard and I know that you are all doing your best to keep your vital ministries going in every way possible.
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> The truth is no one was prepared for the consequences of such a rapid and widespread transmission of the Covid-19 virus. We are still reeling from trying to catch up with the virus, and we do not know for certain whether we have flattened the curve of the rate of infection. Furthermore, each area of the country is being differently affected, and will have differing regulations from region to region. So we are in a time that needs our utmost attention.
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> Just last evening, I had an important call with Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar, who, as many of you know, is an Orthodox Christian himself. I will say more about that later, but it is clear that the world is looking at all religious institutions to offer more than just spiritual solace. We have capacity that may be untapped for the common good.

Brothers, we will get through this crisis, through the grace of God, with the intercessions of His Holy Mother and all the Saints. This is a time that challenges faith, and our faithful will look to us to be their support and show them the way.

Therefore, first and foremost, I counsel all of us to lean upon the Lord, as it says in the Psalm:

“The Lord is my foundation, and my refuge, and my deliverer. My God is my helper, and I will hope in Him….”[1]

The greatest service that you can offer to your parishioners right now is to help make it through another day with hope and expectation for the future.

And this is not so easy. We all began the year with many high hopes and many plans, and today, we need to be prepared and flexible in our thinking, so that rather than react to conditions, we can respond in a way that affirms our leadership to the Faithful. They look to us when we are not looking. They listen to us, and they read our signals. We must pay extra care to how we shepherd the Flock of Christ during this crisis.

Let me say a few words about how we are conducting the Divine Services right now. We have taken extraordinary measures – and I do mean the restrictions about limiting our public assemblies. But never forget, the Ekklesia extends far beyond the four walls of any church building. We are celebrating the Divine Liturgy for the life of the world, and whether your service is live-streamed or not, it is vital that it take place.

The Divine Liturgy is wherever two or three are gathered in His Holy Name,[2] and where the worship of God is, as the Lord commands, “in spirit and in truth.”[3] If you are live-streaming, please show great care with how your service is shown on video. Better not to present the Liturgy in a format with poor audio and bad camera angles than to broadcast it at all.

Remember, the Divine Service is not a show; it is worship, and the Faithful are edified just knowing that the Liturgy of the Church continues. They will pray and chant, light candles and burn incense, venerate icons and even relics in their own homes.

By a strange twist of fate, this restricted season is an opportunity for them to reinvigorate their spiritual lives in the context of their homes, to make real the κατ' οίκον εκκλησία, the Church in the home, and this is certainly a good outcome from a bad situation. Moreover, this season of fasting from the Divine Services is creating the holy desire for the Banquet of the Liturgy. The faithful will be even more hungry for the tangible experience of worship once the danger has passed. In the meanwhile, our conduct as clergy, and how we bring the value of our ministry to the faithful, is more important than ever.

Be a model pastor: Ask your faithful for their needs, ask them for names to pray for, and assure them of your prayers for them. Your parishioners need to know that you are commemorating all of them by name in every Proskomide, aloud and with a particle for each name. They need you to communicate with them regularly and frequently. Reach out personally across all communication platforms: From the traditional telephone, to digital on social media and video conferencing.

Make home visits and bring Holy Communion to them as they request, and offer the Sacrament, even if they do not request. But take every necessary precaution for your own health and the health of your faithful. We know that the Holy Eucharist, as our Ecumenical Patriarchate noted just two weeks ago in an official Communiqué,[4] is the "antidote to death," and we affirm that the Most Holy Body and the Most Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is the source eternal life. And we affirm that the traditional way of receiving the Eucharist is not a vector for disease of any kind. Please do not get into scholastic discussions about what aspect of which is holy. Leave such as this to the Scribes and Pharisees who want to be right about everything.

But we also know that if the living icon of God, the human being, can transmit the virus, then there will be cases of transmission within the confines of the Church. This is ultimately the purpose of restricting attendance at this time and all the measures of precaution that have

been counseled.

But this does not mean that we alter, as the Lord says: ἰῶτα ἓν ἢ μία κεραία – “not a iota, not a dot,”[5] of our Holy Orthodox Faith. We maintain without pause or interruption the teaching of the Church, and as our Mother Church counsels us, we remain “firm in the Orthodox teaching regarding the Holy Eucharist.”[6]

In addition to our attention to the Divine Services and the Sacramental needs of our parishioners, we are also obligated to think outside the box for our pastoral ministry. Just the other day, our Three Hierarchs Church in Brooklyn did a beautiful service to its local neighborhood and community. Father Pappas enlisted a local parishioner who was a florist, and the next thing you know there was a magnificent cross of flowers on the Church steps with a sign that read: “Take a flower for hope.” What a beautiful way to witness to the Gospel, and to do so observing both all health precautions, and all legal restrictions.

This kind of initiative and out of the box thinking is to be commended, and it is effective in maintaining the presence of the Church in a tangible and physical way.

But there is also the virtual method of having “touch points” for your parishioners. Challenge your youth and young adults to lead the digital transformation of your parish; to brainstorm new ministry models and modes of outreach; empower them to be co-ministers with you to touch the lives of all. The Holy Spirit breathes life. And living parishes imbued with the grace of the Spirit will give life.

Know that I stand by you and my concern is ever with you. Over the coming days, the Archdiocese will support your efforts by providing you a “digital tool box” that will cover needs ranging from online donations to ministry resources to parish “streaming kits,” to keep your parish running both financially and liturgically.

In this time of restricted movement – and we do not yet know how long these restrictions will remain in force, for they will surely differ from locality to locality, we must apply ourselves with innovation and ingenuity.

There is a presentation that the APC will make to each and every one of you that will have suggestions, recommendations, and information to

help you through this crisis of applicable ministry in a time of restricted freedom of assembly.

Please makes sure that you work in concert with the guidance of our Holy Mother Church the Ecumenical Patriarchate and your local Metropolitan and their staff. This is a crisis that we can come through with even greater spiritual vitality than before, because even though the flesh is indeed weak, our spirits are willing, ready and able.

Two final words before I take some questions with the help of Fr. Mark Leondis, the President of your APC.

The first concerns Holy Week and Pascha. We do not yet know whether we shall be able to celebrate with the Assembly of the Faithful, and we are preparing, if necessary, recommendations for how to observe this most sacred Week of the year without the participation of your parishioners. These guidelines will come as suggestions so that your people do not feel utterly left out of the Holy Services.

Second, the much-anticipated Apostolic Visit of His All-Holiness to America is in doubt as I speak, not only because venues will be closed off and others may be cancelled, but because we have to take into consideration the time it will take to restore social confidence after the crisis has passed.

My brothers in Christ, we are experiencing a worldwide plague from which recovery in our physical, social, psychological, emotional, and financial lives has yet to begin.

I mentioned to you earlier that I spoke with Secretary Azar, about the what the Churches could do in this time to be of practical assistance, beyond our contributions of encouragement and solace. He asked that we pay special attention to the needs of the doctors, nurses, and health care workers in the local communities of each parish. In addition, we asked that we muster our charitable resources to help and ensure that food and nutrition needs of the children in our local communities.

Brothers, each of you may develop initiatives that are repeatable elsewhere, so I ask you to share your work with the APC. If applicable, we can spread it around the country. All ideas are good ideas!

Even as we concentrate on our spiritual recovery, and give the blessed assurance to our people – the People of God, the Church must be present in practical ways.

I have no doubt that with faith, hope, and the love of God, we will overcome, we will see brighter days, and the Resurrection will triumph over all.

Thank you for all that you are doing and for joining me today, and I now ask Father Mark Leondis to take over the call and assist with your questions.

— Source: goarch.org