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Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America – Metropolitan Joseph's Pastoral Letter for Holy Week



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April 10, 2020

Beloved Faithful in Christ,

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

By the grace of God, we have come to the completion of the forty-day fast. Our ascetical labors this year have been without the consolations of the Lenten services or the gathering of the faithful to receive the Holy Eucharist. We have made these difficult decisions to protect our vulnerable brothers and sisters as well as our health care workers by reducing opportunities for this novel virus to spread unchecked. I know that this has been as immensely difficult for all of you as it has been for me. We all long for that day when we will gather again in our churches to

receive the Heavenly Bread and the Cup of Life as the people of God.

We hoped that we would be able to return to a normal liturgical life during Holy Week and Pascha. Unfortunately, after much prayer and deliberation, in coordination with our Mother Church of Antioch and the other Orthodox jurisdictions comprising the Assembly of Bishops as well as with the advice of the civil authorities and public health officials, we have determined that the time is not yet here. While we are heartbroken to extend the restrictions of our services to clergy, servers and chanters during this most holy time of the year, we take heart knowing that we are all sharing this burden together.

We give thanks to God that we are beginning to hear of hopeful signs in this fight. We even hear of plans for a return to normal life or as they say a new normal. Beloved in Christ, I want us to reflect this Holy Week – in the quiet prayerfulness of our little home churches – on what we should consider normal. So much of what our fallen humanity considers normal was transformed by the Passion and Resurrection of our Savior. How can we continue to strive for power, wealth, or lusts of the flesh when we look on the Cross of our Crucified Master? How can we willingly enslave ourselves to sin when Christ has broken our bonds asunder and raised up our fallen nature by His Resurrection?

Let our thirst for a return to normal life not be for a return to what is natural to our fallen human state, but for a life full of grace and holiness. Let our new normal include this increased life of prayer in our homes. Let it continue to include a willingness to sacrifice our needs for the needs of our neighbor, a greater sense of responsibility to our wider community, a deepened feeling of gratitude for our many blessings, a heightened concern for the elderly and vulnerable, and an increased respect for our health care workers and first responders. When we are able to return triumphantly to our churches – as the crowds joined Christ triumphantly entering Jerusalem – let our desire for the Holy Eucharist today be a reminder for all our days to never take it for granted. Let our every reception going forward be with greater love for God and our neighbor, forgiveness for all who have offended us, prayerful preparation, genuine repentance, and true thanksgiving.

Beloved in Christ, I offer my gratitude to all of you for your cooperation during these trying times. We have heard many times this week that, although there are signs of hope, the time to let up on the social distancing measures has not yet arrived. Likewise, our time of fervent prayer for our deliverance from this pandemic is still vitally necessary. We need all of our homes to be churches during this Holy Week, and we need all your prayers to be offered up continually as sweet-smelling incense. Do not let up, my dear spiritual children!

This year we will anticipate the glorious Resurrection on the third day as the disciples did – from within our homes with the doors being shut. Just as the Resurrected Christ came to them in the Upper Room to reveal His victory over sin and death, may He also reveal Himself mystically in all our homes and instill in our hearts the joy of His presence and the firm assurance that He has overcome the world.

With great love and fervent prayers for all as we bow down and worship the lifegiving and saving Passion of our Lord, I remain,

Your Father in Christ,

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

— Source: antiochian.org