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Does Church stop in the midst of the pandemic?



An article dedicated to the young people of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain in the midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic.

The unprecedented global impact of the COVID-19 Virus has interrupted the regular pace and rhythm of our lives. We have all been working to make adjustments and sacrifices, some small and some big, for the safety and well-being of ourselves, our families, our local communities and, ultimately, all of humankind. Through these efforts, we are finding new and creative ways to continue living our lives under these challenging conditions. Of course, the Church has also been working very hard—all around the world—to continue to minister and provide for the faithful in a variety of ways. One aspect of our Church's ministry is a particular care for the youth. As some of you may be aware, before the outbreak of this pandemic our Archdiocese was in the process of renewing and strengthening our youth ministry network. Undoubtedly, our desire to reach out to and work with the parishes, schools and other institutions of our Archdiocese has encountered certain obstacles, as a result of the threat of the Coronavirus. Nevertheless, the loving embrace of the Church is prepared to overcome any challenge to meet the needs of, and faithfully serve, Her young flock. Our Archdiocese, therefore, with the aid of available technology, has continued to develop and introduce new and creative initiatives, especially for our young people.

Before we introduce these new initiatives, allow us to briefly elaborate on what the term 'Church' really means to us. As Orthodox Christians we believe that the Church is not simply a building where we go to worship, but rather is constituted of people—people who are images and children of God. The Church is you, our clergy, and all the faithful in communion together with one another in Christ. In the New Testament, after His death and Resurrection, Christ called the faithful to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matt 28:19). Since that day, His Church's structure is comprised of a Christian community in each city or region, which is governed by its own bishop, with presbyters (priests) and deacons assisting him. For this reason, Saint Ignatius of Antioch (35-140 AD) placed special emphasis upon two things: the role of the Bishop, who, as Saint Ignatius writes, presides in the place of Christ, as well as the celebration of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. So, we see that the Church is organized in a hierarchy, with a particular structure headed by the Bishop, and it is sacramental; the unity of the Church is realised in the celebration of and participation in Holy Communion. The Divine Liturgy is at the centre of Christian life. Christ's body, however, is not only in the Common Cup, we ourselves become members of His body through Communion. Communion and the other sacraments reveal the vital charismatic nature of the Church to us. Fifty days after Pascha, we celebrate Pentecost (this year on the the 7th June) the inauguration of the Church on earth, when the Holy Spirit came to dwell and remain with us as members of Christ's Church. Let us not forget then that the Holy Spirit dwells and

remains with us as members of Christ's Church, having received the 'seal of the Holy Spirit' (Eph 1:13-14) in the sacrament of Chrismation, and are thus called to 'walk by the Spirit' (Gal 5:16) and share in His fruits. (Gal 5:22-24)

This means beloved friends that, although we are not able for this short period of time to receive Christ in Holy Communion at Church, we are still full members of His body, praying, along with our Archbishop and Shephard, our families, friends and loved ones at home or through the internet, as we act out Christ's sacrificial love in word and in deed. The Church remains wholly intact, vividly present, and praying continuously 'for the peace of the world,' that God may dwell amongst us, healing and transforming our entire being in order that we may give 'our whole lives to Christ our God.' So, you are each still vital members of the body of Christ and it is the Church's responsibility to care and minister to you. The Church reassures us that—through patience and reflection on the opportunities for greater emphasis on family and communal unity, through offering care and concern without discrimination to those at risk, and by increasing our desire to grow in faith—we will come out of this crisis stronger and more united.

The Church never ceases to act, to produce, to care for the world, and to exist for all of humankind. At the online opening of our Archdiocesan Sunday School, we highlighted to the children taking part, from their homes across the country, that there is one fact and truth that should remain with us all the days of our lives: that Christ will remain with us forever. Through His Resurrection 'the light of forgiveness has risen from the tomb,' (Saint John Chrysostom's Paschal Homily) and eternal joy and love prevail. The Church ceaselessly invites you to live out this reality, by continually being renewed in Christ (2 Cor 5:17), no matter the circumstances. Saint Porphyrios, a contemporary saint who lived in Athens, Greece, writes, 'turn your mind towards Him continually. Learn to love prayer, converse with the Lord. In order not to live in darkness, turn on the switch of prayer so that divine light may flood your soul. Christ will appear in the depth of your being,' for 'the Kingdom of God is within you.' (Lk 17:21) This personal relationship with 'Our Father in Heaven' presupposes a communal relationship within the life of the Church. 'You cannot have God as your Father if you do not have the Church as your Mother...God is one and Christ is one, and His Church is one; one is the faith, and one is the people cemented together by harmony into the strong unity of a body ... in the peace of Christ' (St Cyprian of Carthage).

It is in our dedication to you as the young people of this Archdiocese, that we provide 'weekly meditations,' (thoughts to start our week) catechetical talks and videos, online material and resources for families, and new online Sunday school

classes on Zoom for ages 6-10, 11-14 and 15-18, so that we can offer our children and young families opportunities and encouragement to grow in the Christian faith, to interact with one another and to experience the Church as the ark of our salvation. Although you were confined in your own homes during this year's Holy Week, we had an online talk from a professor of Pastoral Theology at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Fr Athanasius Gkikas, who spoke on the topic of 'Holy Week from home and the teachings of Elder Aimilianos of Mount Athos.' The talk was informative and spiritually nurturing—a summary can be found on our Facebook page. Furthermore, we are in the process of organising an Online Youth meeting, not only consisting of short talks to discuss contemporary issues, but primarily to give the opportunity for you to ask questions, as well as to share your ideas and concerns.

Finally, dear friends, we have much to look forward to when this trying period comes to a close and we are able to finally meet again in person (Matt 18:20): We will organise, by God's grace, a celebratory dinner and ball, for the whole Archdiocese at a hotel in London, as well as a Youth Forum with representatives from each community across our eparchy participating, a day dedicated to our young altar servers, further catechetical lessons, spiritual talks and materials, pilgrimages and other social events. We are in the process of creating new Orthodox Christian Student societies (and expanding our existing ones) in the main academic institutions of our cities, and are further developing relationships with our schools and yearly Archdiocesan youth camp. The new youth office of the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain is truly here for you, to serve your needs and, primarily, to remind you that the Church, that Christ, as 'the light of the world' (Jn 8:12) invites you and all of us, in repentance and communion, never to perish, but to live eternally with Him (Jn 3:36).

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