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Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America - Pastoral Letter from His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph on the Feast of All Saints



June 8, 2020

Beloved Faithful in Christ,

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

As we wrote in our pastoral letter for Pentecost, these holiest of days have been difficult and heartrending. We have experienced the unprecedented restrictions on the gathering of our faithful in the churches, anxiety and fear stemming from a new virus spreading with great speed throughout the world, economic distress arising from the lockdowns, and controversies and divisions arising from the various ways in which the various churches have chosen to respond to the situation. As we have steadily returned to a more normative liturgical and sacramental life, we have been further rocked by the killing of George Floyd while under police custody and the subsequent protests.

We called in our letter for our communion with God to light a flame, not of anger and divisiveness, but of love and reconciliation. We have desired throughout these days to return everyone to the churches as soon as possible in a safe and responsible way. We have striven to balance the need for our people to be physically in church during these trying times without becoming ourselves a part of prolonging or worsening them.

Keeping in balance these considerations, I am granting my blessing to all our churches in the United States to open to 25% of their seating capacity by this upcoming weekend of All Saints. In areas where there are fewer restrictions and the reported numbers of new cases are decreasing, parishes may open to the highest capacity allowed while maintaining social distancing according to our Archdiocesan directives – at least six feet of distance between worshippers not of the same household and keeping an empty pew between occupied ones. These updated guidelines apply to the celebration of all sacraments as well. The situation in some of the provinces in Canada is unique, and we will continue to monitor the situation and continue to look for a means of redress there.

I would like to take this moment to reiterate a few important things about these difficult days we have experienced. We did not ask our faithful to worship from home out of a fear of death or a belief that our churches or sacraments are carriers of disease. Our world was confronted by a novel virus to which no one had yet been exposed and no doctor had yet learned to treat. In addition to those factors, the virus could be spread before the onset of symptoms by people unaware they were sick. We were asked to join our local communities in slowing the spread of the virus by not gathering in crowds. This was to prevent an overwhelming of the healthcare system, allowing the doctors and nurses to give adequate care to the sick and thus avoid unnecessary deaths. We saw examples of hospitals in New York and New Jersey becoming quickly overwhelmed, tragically resulting in the sick being left on gurneys in hallways and the dying having to say goodbye to loved ones over the

internet on tablets. As your father in Christ, I felt a heavy weight of responsibility and immense pain in asking our faithful to cooperate in this effort, and I hope all of you understand my desire to spare the rest of the Archdiocese from experiencing the disaster that we witnessed unfold here.

As of the writing of this letter, there is so much good news in which we can rejoice. After a month of states reopening, the nationwide curve has remained mostly flat, and while testing has gone up, the percentages of positive tests have gone down. Instead of thanking God for the good news, we see recriminations and anger flowing from some quarters. We understand that this has been immensely hard for us to remain at home during the height of our Church year. We also understand that as the situation improved, some of our civil authorities either refused to loosen their restrictions in a commensurate way or created reopening plans that did not take the churches into equal consideration. We have been working for weeks through the Assembly of Bishops to petition those civil authorities to reconsider their unfair placement of the churches in their phased reopening plans. With this letter, we believe that any further restriction of our churches in the United States below 25% capacity is an undue burden on the exercise of our freedom of religion, and we grant our blessing to our parishes to open to this level nationwide. Let our joy this weekend of All Saints be full!

We have stated throughout these difficult days that Holy Communion is the “medicine of immortality” not a vector of disease. We have also consistently stated that our method of distributing the Holy Gifts is not open to question. With great pain and heartache, we cooperated with our civil authorities in the limiting of gatherings of the faithful, but our cooperation ends with any infringement on the traditional practices of our Faith. As we welcome you back to the churches, we call on you to draw near to receive the Holy Gifts, not with the fear of a virus, but with the fear of God, faith, and love.

While our desire for our people to return to the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church is foremost on our minds, we also want to allow for a cautious and wise return to other aspects of parish life. We are hesitant to grant our blessing to returning to in-person meetings and social gatherings, but if parishes are in areas where these are permitted, we encourage any in-person meetings to be held in small numbers with adequate social distancing. We grant our blessing for parish social events to be held outdoors and replace summer fundraising events with curbside pick-up sales if all the guidelines of the local health departments are strictly followed.

We strongly prefer parishes to continue with practice of using two chanters

chanting opposite one another on different sides of the solea to reduce the chance of spreading the virus through aerosolization. There have been competing studies on the issue of singing, so we grant our blessing to parishes in areas with decreasing numbers of new cases with large church buildings with good ventilation to use choirs of no more than six members with increased spacing between one another than the usual six feet. In all these areas that we have mentioned above, we expect our priests and parish councils to exercise their good judgment and practice all the health and safety measures dictated by their local health departments.

We have experienced tumultuous days that have required many difficult decisions based on rapidly changing and sometimes contradictory information. Everything we have done has been based on much prayer and deliberation, and we have and will continue to do our best to balance our responsibilities to our people and our wider communities. I continue to ask your prayers for myself and my brother hierarchs as we navigate our Archdiocese through these times of anxiety and civil unrest and be assured of our fervent and heartfelt prayers for you.

This weekend of All Saints is a wonderful reminder that the Passion of our Lord, Third-Day Resurrection, Ascension, and Sending of the Holy Spirit have all taken place that we may become holy as our Lord is holy, as perfect as He is perfect. Through the life of the Church, we are called to be one with our Lord and with one another as He is with the Father and the Spirit. Let us strive to pray more, forgive more, and serve more that we may attain lives of holiness and be joined with our Lord together with the choir of the Saints unto the ages of ages.

With paternal love and care for all, I remain,

Your Father in Christ,

+JOSEPH

Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of all North America

[Source](#)