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Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America: A pastoral letter to the clergy from His Eminence Metropolitan Joseph



January 18, 2021

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Dear Reverend Clergy,

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

I pray that you and your holy communities have celebrated joyous and grace-filled feasts of our Lord's Nativity in the flesh, Circumcision on the eighth day, and Baptism in the Jordan. In all of these holy feasts, we witness the love, humility, and obedience of our Lord. He was born to the humble Virgin and laid in a manger to unite His divinity to our humanity. He submitted to circumcision in the flesh in accordance to the Mosaic Law to heal the uncircumcision of our hearts. He bowed His head to be baptized by the hand of His creature to heal the stiffness of our necks. What love and condescension we see in the saving dispensation of our God! The contrast between the example of our Lord and the world we see around us in these latter days can hardly be more stark. All around us, we see not the humility, obedience, and love of Christ but rather the pride, divisiveness, wrath, and defiance of the ancient enemy from which Christ has set us free. Our world has

undergone the trial of a pandemic the likes of which we have not seen for over a century. The United States is witnessing a deterioration of its civil society not experienced since the Civil War.

Of course, these situations will bring out anxieties, and the anxieties will bring out our passions, but dear clergy, our role is to be icons of our Lord to the faithful – humble, loving, and obedient. We offer the Holy Eucharist to the faithful that they may be the Body of Christ in the world and thereby transfigure it. Too often, we and our faithful are joining with the world and fanning the flames of the passions instead of offering the world the peace which is beyond all understanding.

I write to you today as your father in Christ, joined by my brother hierarchs, to call us to unity. During our recent meeting of the bishops, we discussed how the bishops must speak with one voice to our clergy, and our clergy must speak with this one voice to the laity. Our recent communication quoted St. Ignatius of Antioch likening our ministries to the strings of an instrument playing a harmonious chord, and we must demonstrate this unity for our faithful in this extremely dangerous time in the life of our world. This unity does not stop when we take off our cassock or sign onto the internet – we are always priests!

While I mean this call to unity to be general to all aspects of our Archdiocesan life, I would like to speak about some specific issues in this letter:

We wrote previously that our clergy are not to engage in politics and not post about divisive political issues on the internet or social media without an express blessing from me. I offered the beautiful quote from St. Nicholas Planas about keeping silence rather than speaking out and causing more turmoil. Unfortunately, I continue to receive reports from members of our faithful who have been scandalized by posts that they perceived as provocative coming from their clergy.

Let me share with you that during the chaos of the Lebanese civil war, our father in Christ, Patriarch Ignatius IV, distinguished himself from the other religious leaders of the region by rising above the disastrous sectarianism that was raging and stoking violence at the time. He was the one that all sides knew could be trusted because his only allegiance was to Christ. His example had a profound impact on my life and ministry, and I share this with you that you may be edified by it as well.

I am pained to say, beloved clergy, that if my previous directive was not clear enough to dissuade you from this kind of behavior, I need to warn you that I must begin to bring disciplinary actions against those who are disobedient. I say this not out of a spirit of anger or vengeance but fatherly love. You cannot be a priest in the image of our Lord and engage in behavior that does not model His love, humility, and obedience. You may point out the instances in the gospels where Christ acts forcefully with righteous indignation, but I would point out that every instance had to do with the failures and hypocrisies of the religious leadership of that time – never with the politics of the Roman Empire or the public policies of Pontius Pilate or Herod Antipas. Call your people to greater piety and repentance – not politics. If

our people are living Christian lives, the political situation will take care of itself. From the outset of the pandemic, we have striven to avoid the extremes of overacting based on irrational fear and underreacting based on irresponsible zeal. We have tried to balance opening our churches for the people to receive the sacraments and utilizing the strategies asked of us to mitigate the risks of our people spreading the virus among themselves. From the outset, we have had clergy and laity attempting to pull us to one extreme or the other, but I believe we have stayed the course, and I have a clear conscience regarding the directives we have put in place during these trying and confusing times.

One of the most divisive issues throughout has been the wearing of masks. Our directives have been clear that you must strongly encourage the wearing of masks by the faithful. We stopped short of using the terms “mandatory” or “required” because there are legitimate health reasons given by WHO and CDC that may preclude some people from wearing them. We did not stop short of mandating masks because we wanted to provide a loophole for our parishes to get around the directive. Our expectation is that all the faithful will wear the face-coverings in church, and we expect our clergy not to encourage their flocks to disobey the letter and the spirit of our directives.

We understand that this issue has been a heated one. There are two competing sets of values that have come into conflict. Those who do not want to wear a face covering tend to believe they are showing courage and trust in God, while those who do want to wear one tend to believe they are showing love and compassion to their neighbor. These are laudable virtues in themselves, but we must show discernment in how we balance them. The former group often declares that no one can contract a virus in the church during services, but over the course of dealing with this pandemic, that has been demonstrated to be untrue around the world and in our Archdiocese. We continue in our assurance that Holy Communion is never a source of spreading disease, nor do I believe the holy things of the Church are, but we as sinful people can spread sickness among one another. We have to be honest about this and take reasonable precautions.

Regarding the clergy wearing masks during the services, our initial directives precluded celebrants from wearing them except after the services while giving antidoron. This directive was issued at a time when we were not doing clerical concelebrations, and we would like to update the directives to say that the clergy may wear a mask while concelebrating in close proximity to others. We also reiterate that the clergy must wear a mask when interacting in close proximity with the faithful. Again, I do not write this out of some kind of lack of faith but out of the lived experience of this past year and my fatherly concern for you and the faithful.

Finally, we hear reports that there are clergy encouraging the faithful not to receive the vaccines. Some cite ethical questions raised about possible connections the vaccines have to aborted fetuses, some about whether the vaccines are safe, and

some about conspiracy theories. The bishops' meeting discussed these questions at length. The two vaccines being offered in the United States did not use fetal cells in either their development or production. While there was confirmatory testing done on a stem cell line tracing back to the 1970s, neither I nor any of the bishops believe this indirect connection is an impediment to the faithful receiving these vaccines in good conscience. Whether or not the vaccine is safe or adequately tested is a question beyond the scientific knowledge and training of our bishops or clergy; this conversation should solely be between the faithful and their doctors.

As for the conspiracy theories, I do not believe this warrants discussion other than to say this is unacceptable for our clergy to engage in such things. I would like to point out that you are a priest of this Archdiocese, and you venerate my name on the antimension before offering the Holy Anaphora. You owe obedience to Christ and the Gospels, the Mother Church of Antioch, this Archdiocese, and my office as the Metropolitan Archbishop not to internet personalities you find on Facebook and YouTube – whether they be priests, bishops, or monastic elders.

To conclude, I would like to offer one corrective to what I believe may be a source of some of our controversies over these matters. Many of our civil authorities have claimed to impose restrictions on us with the claim that they were acting for public safety but instead acted with unfairness towards the churches. They have claimed their decisions were guided by science but seem to have been guided more by aggressive secularism. We worked with our sister jurisdictions of the Assembly of Bishops to address the more egregious of these unfair regulations, and we rejoiced at the recent decision of the Supreme Court to ensure our rights of free exercise are respected.

With fewer governmental regulations at this stage, we are called upon to be more responsible for ourselves. We have worked with Orthodox Christian doctors and public health officials at every step of the way to ensure that we are informed on the relevant science by those who also share the beliefs of the Faith. I believe that this is vitally important because we should be informed by science but not enslaved to a secular scientism. We are adopting mitigating strategies (wearing masks, social distancing, cleaning, asking those with symptoms to stay home, etc.) that hopefully work together in tandem to protect our people but with a humble realization that these are imperfect and ultimately, we are in the hands of God and His inscrutable will.

We should be clear that the pestilence will not go away simply because of our strategies or even a vaccine. We will find deliverance only when we call our people and ourselves to repentance. I believe too many of us want to do these restrictions temporarily and take the vaccine to have life return to a previous “normal” of engaging in passions and lusts. God wants to see that a deliverance from this pestilence will bring about a “new normal” of greater piety, increased participation in the sacraments, and more love and service to our neighbor. We can adopt the

worldly strategies to fight this virus, but we must not forget to utilize the heavenly ones. Let us stop raging about the inconveniences of the worldly strategies in order to focus ourselves and our flocks on the heavenly ones.

I deeply appreciate the work you have done amidst the anxiety and pressures of this historical moment. I write all of this as a loving father. Let us join together in brotherly concord and play that harmonious melody spoken of by St. Ignatius for our faithful.

With paternal love and fervent prayers on your behalf, I remain,

Your Father in Christ,

+JOSEPH

Archbishop of New York and Metropolitan of all North America

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