



The HOLY SYNOD of the ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

May 1, 2020

To the clergy, monastics, and faithful of the Orthodox Church in America,

*Today is spring filled with sweet fragrance
And creation, renewed, does exult.
Today, the keys are removed from the doors,
As is the unbelief of Thomas, the friend of Christ,
Who crieth, 'My Lord and my God.'*¹

We are completing the second week of our celebration of the great feast of feasts, Holy Pascha, in which we are reminded of the blessed unbelief of Thomas. All of us have longed to *touch the life-giving side* of the risen Christ *with an eager hand* even as Thomas did when our Lord came to the apostles through closed doors. And yet, many of us were deprived of the opportunity, not only to touch His side, but even to enter the temple in order to sing: “Bless God in the congregations, the Lord, O you who are of Israel’s fountain.” (Psalm 68:26)²

Our encounter with the pandemic brought about by the coronavirus came upon us in the midst of our journey through the desert of Great Lent. The struggle remains with us during the bright season of the resurrection but now we sense the fragrance of the eternal and physical spring, which brings with it the hope of good things to come. Indeed, with you, the Holy Synod of Bishops longs for the full opening of our churches, missions, monasteries, and seminaries so that we all might return to the fullness of our church life, and with Thomas, offer our worship to the Lord by crying out: “My Lord and my God!”

While the dates for a full opening are still unknown, we are convinced that the time has come for us to begin the preparatory work that will bring us closer to those days. This preparatory work will be difficult as we make our way through the spiritual, emotional, and psychological effects of isolation and quarantine. This preparatory work will also be slow, for we must test the procedures and steps that we will collectively take in restoring our

¹ Exapostilarion, Thomas Sunday Matins.

² Paschal Liturgy, Introit of the Little Entrance.

church life, so that we might responsibly navigate the many challenges that will confront our communities on the local level.

Above all, we issue a spiritual call to the clergy and faithful of the Orthodox Church in America. While the spread of this virus has caused death, sickness, anxiety, and economic distress, this time has offered us, and continues to offer us, an opportunity to strengthen our prayer life, to perform works of charity, and to show compassion and love to our brothers and sisters in the Church and in our communities. All Orthodox Christians should remember in their prayers those who have fallen asleep, those who are sick, those who have recovered, those who are suffering from fear, anxiety, and distress brought upon them by this virus. Further, we should offer our prayers and sincere gratitude to all those laboring to insure the necessities of life, healthcare workers and first responders, food supply workers, and other essential occupations who have sacrificially offered themselves for the benefit of their neighbor.

The Holy Synod also provides the following fundamental principles that will guide our steps forward:

- o As we have always acknowledged, each diocesan bishop is entrusted with the spiritual and pastoral care of the clergy and faithful, protecting their wellbeing as he determines necessary, while always remaining of one mind with the Holy Synod. The same principle applies in the process of re-opening the churches. Any interpretation or clarification of the following guidelines should be directed to the diocesan bishop. Decisions requiring approval of the Holy Synod will be addressed as needed.
- o To provide for unity and to allow the bishops greater guidance and support regarding how and when to re-open their churches and institutions, the Holy Synod has adopted new directives for use throughout the Orthodox Church in America. This detailed document, entitled, “Towards a Re-opening of our Churches,” is provided as a reference point for the bishops and should be carefully reviewed by all levels of diocesan leadership (Chancellors, Deans, Diocesan Councils, Rectors, and Parish Councils). Implementation of these synodal directives takes place under the authority of the diocesan bishop.
- o It should be understood that there may be variations in the application of these new directives. These variations will parallel those that are found among regions, states, provinces, counties, and municipalities. It is incumbent therefore upon the church leadership, under the direction of their bishop to be familiar with and understand both the civil guidelines and the Church directives that appertain to their local circumstances.
- o We must continue to adhere to the civil guidelines, beginning with those of our federal governments and then the particular and localized guidelines from the civil authorities, recognizing that there is a diversity from state to state, province to province, county to county, and even municipality to municipality. While the civil authorities have been reluctant to impose restrictions on the churches, our communities are expected to respond in a way that is consonant with the public

welfare. The Holy Synod, concerned for the health and well-being of all, intends to follow in the spirit in which those decrees are given.

- o During these initial stages of re-opening, when church attendance will, of necessity, remain limited, the clergy are instructed to consult their diocesan bishop for direction on the celebration of the holy, life-giving mysteries of the Church (the eucharist, baptism and chrismation, marriage, etc). The Holy Synod will consider the need for further church-wide directives in these areas as the process of re-opening unfolds.

The above principles, in conjunction with the synodal directives, are offered with the understanding that they are general principles and directives that may provide for the possible opening of parishes, as long as the local conditions warrant this, and with the consent of the bishop. These are not mandatory steps that must be taken by a certain calendar date.

Finally, we note that there is much to cause anxiety in the current circumstances, from political debates to scientific quarrels and the pitting of experts against other experts. We remind the clergy and the faithful that this current pandemic is unprecedented and that even the experts, faithfully following the scientific method, must have time to gather and analyze data. In such a fast-moving situation, even these studies are provisional and subject to correction. This is the nature of the scientific model.

While being mindful of all this, we also offer a word of encouragement to our clergy and faithful by reminding them of the words of the psalmist: *Thy mercy, O Lord, shall follow me all the days of my life.* Let us trust the Lord to guide us, rely on each other to support and help one another, and kindle in our hearts the fire that Luke and Cleopas felt burning in themselves when the risen Lord appeared and spoke to them on the road to Emmaus.

With our paternal blessing and love,

+Tikhon
+Nathaniel
+Benjamin
+Alejo
+Mark
+Melchisedek
+Irénée
+Michael
+Alexander
+David
+Paul