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Venerable Mary of Egypt

Dear Father Rectors,

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20)

It was with a heavy heart that I approved the diocesan Policy Regarding Public Worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic at the end of March. Even at that time I had great hope that the pandemic would lessen significantly by Holy Week and that we would greet the Day of Days and the Feast of Feasts, the Glorious Resurrection of the Lord, under a new regime. That the quarantine would be suspended or at least significantly relaxed. Unfortunately, the coronavirus has been spread throughout our American Land, and our diocese is suffering greatly, especially in Illinois, Louisiana, and Michigan. I ask your prayers for the suffering, dying, and those serving them in those states especially.

The outbreaks are regional, but the virus is dispersing throughout the entire diocese: slowly in some places, more quickly in others. Due to success in social distancing and sanitary protocols it seems likely that fewer will be stricken, suffer, and die from this pernicious disease and for this we should be thankful to God.

In many regions of our diocese houses of worship are exempt from quarantine rules, some say because of litigation fears. However, the governmental exemptions for religious gatherings do not reduce the risk of infection. It is good that our constitutional rights are being protected, but the virus does not care for our constitutional rights. Nor does it respect the walls of our temples. The Patriarch has counseled the people to stay home until the virus subsides. Our Metropolitan has counseled us all that we should be good citizens and participate in the quarantine.

Therefore, in light of Patriarch Kyrill's guidance, Metropolitan Hilarion's guidance, having reviewed the input from our diocesan clergymen, our Diocesan Legal Counsel, the panel of Orthodox Christian physicians advising the diocese in this matter, and with the unanimous support of our Diocesan Council, I am entirely unhappy to have to announce that the present diocesan policy remain in place for the foreseeable future and not be weakened for Pascha, despite the importance of the holiday, and despite any local waivers for houses of worship.

I bless the Rectors to establish a strict schedule, following sanitary guidelines, allowing the faithful, by household, to venerate the Plashchenitsa (the icon of Christ in the Tomb) on Friday and Saturday of Holy Week. This is a very deeply held tradition in the Orthodox Church. Each family should clean the Plashchenitsa after venerating it. I also bless the Rectors to establish a strict schedule for the blessing of Pascha baskets outside the church, again, by household and following sanitary guidelines. I bless the clergymen, should they wish, to wear masks at times that they feel this is warranted to limit the spread of the disease. Finally, I do not recommend

that Holy Communion be brought to the faithful except in cases of emergent need, and then only following sanitary guidelines.

I ask you to accept this decision prayerfully, obediently, and peacefully. We are treading the path of the historic Russian Orthodox Church, which has historically always worked together with the God-fearing governmental authorities to do everything possible to lessen the death toll during pandemics. My one and only concern in this regard is the good of our clergy and faithful – both spiritual and physical. I ask your prayers for me, for each other, and for your parishioners. Lead the people in peace and love and prepare them for the important spiritual days that lie ahead. Prepare them to meet the Resurrection of the Lord with joy. Help them to understand that by depriving themselves of the pleasure and consolation of attending the Divine Services they keep themselves and their neighbors safe – that they do their part as good citizens – that they zealously and unselfishly join the fight of the entire society against this terrible disease. And please ask the prayers of the faithful for me, who must tell you now to do something inimical to every inclination of my heart: to keep the people away from the churches in these most holy days.

I greet you with the upcoming Paschal Feast. May the cry of “Christ is Risen!” resound throughout our diocese from temple to temple and house to house! And may the Lord’s will in this matter, too deep for us to fully fathom, at least be accepted by us with trust in His wisdom and magnanimous love for mankind.

With love in our Lord Jesus Christ,

+ Archbishop Peter

Peter, Archbishop of Chicago & Mid-America

