

Saint Patrick of Ireland

“Lord, I am calling to you, hear me, O Lord.” (Psalm 140)

Dearly Beloved, Clergy, Faithful and Monastics:

These words cried out by King Saint David, the writer of the Psalms, are the words on our lips today as we reflect on the terrible pandemic which overshadows the entire world and our own Nation. We must do more than reflect on the situation; we are called on by government and medical advisors to act in defense of our families and neighbors by temporarily restricting gathering together.

It is necessary for Orthodox Christians to consider what we are called to do. We must continue to be even more concerned for our neighbor, for others. From various official sources, we are called on to refrain from gathering in groups. Some sources indicate the maximum number of a gathering at “100”; others say “50”; and others “10.” The problem is that no one can state with assurance any particular number. No one knows, because it takes just one to be a carrier of the virus. Is it “I?” Is it “you?” The “who” is unknown and at this time, unknowable. That is why there is no “safe” number of individuals, for each comes together from various parts of a city, from various work and service environments, bringing with them possible contamination.

We posed the question to a medical physician in the Episcopate: “Should the churches be closed entirely?” The response was a resounding, “Yes!” Considering the insecurity of guessing who might be infected with the virus, we are terminating all gatherings in the parishes; liturgical, administrative and social at least until March 31 when we will review the status of the pandemic as determined by medical and government sources.

The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church has given much consideration concerning the action the bishops ought to take. We will review the situation at the end of March.

God is not deaf to our needs. He gives us physicians and authorities to coordinate our needs in this time of concern and anxiety. He invites us to work together, even as the Good Samaritan cared for the needs known and unknown of his neighbor.

The services usually held during this Lenten period of the church year will not be scheduled: Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Holy Gifts, Akathist, Holy Unction, Confession. If a baptism was scheduled, it should be rescheduled. Funerals should be held at funeral homes. Additionally, all meetings and events are also to be postponed/suspended.

In the meanwhile, we encourage families and individuals to pray before the family icons and to recite together the familiar prayers. Read from the Holy Bible: Psalms, Gospels,

and Epistles. Say the prayers before and after meals. Bless one another with words and kind deeds. Ask the Holy Mother of God to cover us with her mantle.

The reverend clergy will offer prayers at home for the faithful. Should there be someone who is at the portal of the next life, the priest may take the Eucharist for the sick to that person.

We do NOT bless celebrating the Divine Liturgy with just the priest and cantor.

The purpose of this statement is to protect, not to punish; to sustain and to comfort. It is prepared with a heavy heart, knowing that it may cause some grief and dissatisfaction from clergy and faithful. We are hopeful, nevertheless, that it is a positive action on the Episcopate's part in working with others to contain the spread of the virus.

We earnestly pray that just as King David cried out to be heard, that the Nations will be spared of a wider spreading of the virus, and that we soon will also cry out, "I will thank your name once more in the assembly of the virtuous for the goodness you have shown me." (Psalm 141:9)

May our Lord Jesus Christ, the Physician of our souls and bodies, grant us protection, health, and peace!

With hope in the Lord and with fervent prayers for everyone,

+NATHANIEL, Archbishop