



April 27, 2020
Apostle and Evangelist Mark

Preliminary Process, Considerations, and Concerns to Address Before Resuming Broader Liturgical Gatherings

Dear Rev. Frs., esteemed members of the parish councils and faithful,

Christ is Risen! Indeed, He Is Risen! I pray you had an enjoyable and blessed Bright Week. Above all, I pray you are in good health and are taking care of yourselves and one another. First and foremost, I want to thank the clergy for their tireless efforts during the past few months in adapting to this unprecedented situation. All have moved outside their personal comfort zone and areas of experience to continue to be engaged with their respective parishes. Thank you for your faithfulness to your calling. Additionally, I commend the faithful who assisted the clergy in numerous ways, through assisting with phone calls to the faithful, wellness checks, technological services, as well as, serving and singing for the benefit of the entire community. May our Lord bless us with patience as we tread an unfamiliar pathway. Your continued support of the ongoing work of Christ's Holy Church is greatly appreciated. I heard that all parishes with few, i.e., one or two exceptions, experienced no decline in financial support!

Over the past three days our clergy engaged in video conferences on a deanery by deanery basis to discuss considerations and concerns in anticipation of parishes resuming normative and broader Liturgical services and fuller attendance. These discussions were quite fruitful in many regards. There is no one answer for the OCA, the Diocese or even the Deaneries. Every parish has its own unique situation, building configuration and population which requires engagement and collaboration between the Diocese, the clergy, parish councils and the faithful, ever mindful of civil authorities and the Center for Disease Control guidelines and recommendations. These discussions and this directive are not intended to be preemptive, but proactive. We need to give prayerful and serious thought to development of a plan for each parish.

First of all, let me be clear, the Church was never required by the civil authorities to close or stop having services. Limitations of gatherings of up to 10 persons came from the CDC, not the civil authorities. Stricter limitations were later imposed by the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America, based upon recommendations from the medical field, an insurance agent and attorneys. As those limitations are being reviewed and / or changing, we need to be collaboratively proactive in considering *when* and *how* to move forward within each parish.

Therefore, I would ask the clergy to work with their parish councils to examine their own unique situations. We have parishes that easily allow for social distancing and others that require creative approaches. As your bishop I insist the following be the beginnings of a baseline, gleaned from our video-conference (as other recommendations are received from the clergy, parish councils and faithful, they will be taken into consideration for inclusion in this list):

1. CDC Guidelines must be posted at the entrance of the church along with ongoing updates of verified information pertaining to various age groupings and co-morbidities;



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"Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee." Augustine

2. Parish Councils must insure the sanitation of the facilities as appropriate (Parishioners may be encouraged to bring a throw for their personal space, if that will alleviate anxiety and a pillow case for covering the top of the pew in front of them where they may rest their hands to support themselves);
3. A person or persons are to be appointed to open doors for entry into the church. The doors from the Narthex to the Nave should be left open;
4. Hand sanitizer must be provided in appropriate areas;
5. Every parishioner must wear a mask (Parishes should invest in buying a supply for those who may show up without one.);
6. Choirs are to be moved to the front of the Nave and limited to a minimum (This will minimize any contamination associated with Choir members projecting their voices over the top of the people.)
7. Markers be placed on the flooring to indicate proper distancing for Holy Communion;
8. Paper towels will be used instead of a communion cloth, held by the communicant and disposed of properly;
9. Candles will be placed in the candle holders in advance for the faithful or a designated person to light;
10. Live streaming will continue for those unable to attend regardless of the reason;
11. No parish will be compelled to open, but all parishes must begin discussion of a plan and submit it for approval;
12. No one should be shamed or feel coerced to return before they can comfortably attend (Their concerns should be taken into consideration in developing a plan).

Creative solutions to consider for parishes with larger communities and smaller facilities

1. Live Streaming to a separate part of the facilities for families with toddlers and infants who are resistant to masks or for the elderly;
2. Saturday Liturgies for high risk persons and Sunday Liturgy for families with young children (Alternately, this could be rotated from week to week);
3. Parishes with limited space and larger numbers may need to consider the use of their parish hall for Divine Services, adding another day for at risk persons to attend or Live Streaming for persons who may not fit into the limited worship space, but still able to be present within the facility.

Once again, no parishes is being coerced. Our intent is to simply encourage fruitful dialogue within each parish, which may be helpful to other parishes as well. The Holy Synod will be reviewing its previous guidelines Wednesday April 29th and issued a decision on May 01 which it feels appropriate going forward. The Holy Synod will not be able to hear or address specifics of each civil jurisdiction and the complexities of each Diocesan situation. Their decisions will become a part of the ongoing process, but we have much work to do on a parish by parish basis that is beyond the Holy Synod to address.

I ask your God-pleasing prayers as your unworthy father in Christ,

+ Mark

+MARK, Archbishop of Philadelphia and the Diocese of Eastern Pennsylvania
CC: His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon and the members of the Holy Synod