



The HOLY SYNOD
of the
ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

March 4, 2021

*Let us all joyfully begin the sacred season of abstinence;
And let us shine with the bright radiance of the holy commandments of Christ our God,
With the brightness of love and the splendor of prayer,
With the purity of holiness and the strength of good courage.
So, clothed in raiment of light, let us hasten to the Holy Resurrection on the third day,
That shines upon the world with the glory of eternal life.
(Matins of Monday of the First Week)*

To the Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America,

Dearly Beloved:

We are preparing to pass through the gates of the Great Paschal Fast which will lead us through a season of life-giving repentance to the celebration of the Feast of feasts, Holy Pascha. We enter this season around the same time that society marks the one-year anniversary of the global outbreak of the coronavirus. The pandemic placed a heavy burden on us, not only during last year's Lenten journey and Paschal celebrations but throughout the remainder of the year, to the present day.

On May 1, 2020, we, the members of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, issued a Pastoral Letter and a set of Directives to guide the Church in a gradual re-opening of our parishes, missions, and institutions. At that time, we expressed our common longing for the restoration of full liturgical and parochial life, and we understood that such restoration could take some time. One year later, our sentiments are conveyed in our recently-issued *Encyclical of Hope*, in which we offer our gratitude for the prayers, patience, and sacrificial efforts of the clergy, monastics, and faithful of the Church during these difficult times.

Since last March, much has changed. The Church has responded in a unified manner to the pandemic by voluntarily accepting various safety restrictions for the protection and well-being of our brothers and sisters and our neighbors. The preliminary work that the Holy Synod called for last year has been accomplished with great success, and it is evident that our parishes and institutions have adapted to the difficulties

while maintaining fidelity to the fundamental and necessary liturgical and pastoral activities of the Church.

Some may argue that this adaptation was a capitulation to civil authorities or medical experts, or that it was an expression of faithlessness or fear. We propose, rather, that the Church as a body—the Body of Christ—responded with Christian love, long-suffering patience, and increased mercy in the midst of very difficult and painful circumstances. The members of this body have been stretched—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—through the very same ascetical effort that we strive for during Lent. In many ways, the trials of the pandemic have helped us to face the very realities that all must face: loneliness, suffering, isolation, our passions, and death.

Even in the midst of these trials, we have observed the sacrificial and creative efforts of our clergy, monastics, and faithful as they sought to maintain the integrity and beauty of our liturgical and pastoral life. Our initial restrictions may have seemed overly strict; however, the intent of those restrictions was not to diminish the glory of the Church or to “shut things down,” but rather to pave the way for an orderly re-opening and the full restoration of Church life.

Now we give thanks to God, because it seems that the rate of COVID-19 infections is decreasing across the United States, Mexico, and Canada. While we must remain vigilant, we look forward to the gradual, careful, and deliberate restoration of full liturgical and parochial life. We therefore re-affirm the following:

- The substance of the May 1, 2020 Synodal Directives remains in place. Their implementation is overseen by the diocesan bishop who is entrusted with the spiritual and pastoral care of his clergy, faithful, and monastics, protecting their well-being as he determines necessary, while always remaining of one mind with the Holy Synod.
- 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. Civil authorities have largely been reluctant to impose restrictions on the churches, but 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 guidelines are given.

Finally, with the benefit of our experience during the past year, we encourage our faithful to take advantage of the blessing of the divine services of the Church in all care and safety, to continue to be vigilant, and to look to your bishop for guidance in

this process. In this way, may we all greet the third-day Resurrection with faith, with hope, and with love.

With our paternal blessing and concern,

+ Tikhon

Archbishop of Washington, Metropolitan of All America and Canada
Locum tenens of the Diocese of New England and the Albanian Archdiocese

+ Nathaniel

Archbishop of Detroit and the Romanian Episcopate

+ Benjamin

Archbishop of San Francisco and the West

+ Mark

Archbishop of Philadelphia and Eastern Pennsylvania

+ Alejo

Archbishop of Mexico City and Mexico

+ Melchisedek

Archbishop of Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania

+ Irénée

Archbishop of Ottawa and the Archdiocese of Canada

+ Michael

Archbishop of New York and New York and New Jersey

+ Alexander

Archbishop of Dallas, the South and the Bulgarian Diocese

+ Paul

Archbishop of Chicago and the Midwest