

Memorandum of the bishops of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the United States of America regarding of the COVID-19 pandemic

“Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Mt. 25, 40)

Dear clergy, religious, and faithful!

Responding to the outbreak of the global pandemic virus COVID-19, which has been spreading with lightning speed across the globe, we, bishops of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in the United States, united in solidarity, wish to address you with assurances of our joint prayers and efforts. Bound together in our care for the spiritual and physical health of our faithful, we would like to inform you about certain norms and practices intended to confirm us in faith and truth, safeguarding all members of our communities, especially the most vulnerable, and preventing the spread of disease.

Keeping in mind the fragility of human life and acknowledging with humility the limits of human reason and resources, we are called to do all that is possible to help the national government, local authorities, and medical personnel to fight the spread of the virus.

Medical workers and scientists are unanimous in warning that this fight will be protracted, one that will require the solidarity of all people across the globe. The speed of transportation and the globalization of today’s world facilitate the spread of the virus. But the quality of our interpersonal relations and our solidarity—and it is Christ who grants these gifts—are able to slow down the contagion that takes more and more lives every day. The experience of the countries that squarely faced the consequences of the virus and acted quickly and decisively shows that it is possible.

“Love your neighbor!” These times call us to faith in God, trust in each other, focused efforts, solidarity and coordinated actions. Love, we know, entails closeness, even intimacy. In today’s circumstances, however, a certain distance may be the proper expression of interpersonal love and civic responsibility. Thus, the Ukrainian Catholic Church supports governmental regulations and public health measures connected with the pandemic. We ask you, our dear faithful, to follow the advice of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and take care of your personal safety and hygiene as well as of those around you.

Christ is in our midst! Unfortunately, the necessary public health norms on social distancing, including restrictions on public meetings, make it impossible for the Church to carry on our usual rhythms. At the same time, despite the difficult situation, the Church does not stop Her activity and service. We are called to be creative in living our communion. We Christians continue to bear witness to the presence of God in the created world, to His action in the life of all people, to His love for every person. It is the hour to show our love and care for the elderly in our communities, who today are most at risk and for all who experience social isolation.

These times of trial are a unique opportunity to manifest our love for God and neighbor. Today, when we are limited in public liturgical practices, our life in Christ will be measured by the authentic quality of our personal relationship with God and neighbor: in private and family prayer and in works of charity. In the midst of today’s pandemic caring for one’s neighbor calls for clear and immediate expression.

The experience of our underground Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (1945–1989) is a source of inspiration and faith for us. In recent memory having been deprived of all of its church buildings and all other infrastructure, the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine and elsewhere in the communist world was led by God to find creative ways to foster the spiritual life of its members for two generations. Through excruciating suffering and great losses, our Church was forged, cleansed, and prepared for a new life in a new millennium. Now is the time to prayerfully reflect upon this salvation history. The Lord will guide us again in fortitude and flexibility to praise Him and foster communion and solidarity among us.

Public Services

- 1. All weekday and Sunday services will be celebrated temporarily without the participation of the assembly of the faithful. Our clergy will continue to celebrate and pray for you and with you vicariously.** We will celebrate the Divine Liturgies and other services in behalf of and for all of you, especially for the sick and the healthcare providers. We will beseech the Lord for wise and prudent decisions on the part of government and medical authorities. We will pray for the eternal repose of the deceased. We are obligating our priests to be steadfast in prayer for their flock. Be as Moses, who raised his hands in prayer so that whole people of God could prevail over the enemy (cf. Ex 17, 11-12).
- 2. Our churches will remain open for private prayer at designated times.** We ask the pastors to guarantee the safety and frequent disinfection of our churches.
- 3. We renew and confirm the dispensation from the obligation to participate in Sunday services. At the same time, we ask you to pray as a Domestic Church (as a family or household unit) on Sundays and on Holy Days.** We suggest making use of the ZhyveTV and internet resources of your eparchy or parish. Read prayerfully the Holy Scriptures, reflect upon the source and meaning of your life, on God's love and salvific action on our behalf.
- 4. We encourage you to make best use of the quarantine time, which coincides with Great Lent,** for personal prayer, reading the Word of God, and building a more profound relationship with Our Lord, our neighbors and in our families.
- 5. We ask that all the Lenten practices -- e.g., missions and spiritual exercises -- be held with the aid of the internet and other means of social communication.**

Sacraments and Sacramentals

- 1. We kindly ask that you postpone, in consultation with your pastor, the Sacraments of Christian initiation (Baptism and Chrismation) and Matrimony.**
- 2. The faithful can avail themselves of the Sacrament of Repentance (Confession) in church, taking all necessary precautions for social distancing.**
- 3. In cases of grave illness or danger of death, priests are obligated to administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, while assuring safety for all involved.**
- 4. Priests will celebrate funerals with the participation only of the immediate family members of the deceased, according to local regulations regarding public assemblies.**

Practical advice

1. Dear priests, religious, sisters and brothers! If you feel sick, we urge you to stay at home, call your doctor, and obey all medical and civil regulations.
2. We encourage our pastors to maintain personal contact with their faithful, especially with the elderly and sick by phone and via social media. Our priestly ministry continues without ceasing.
3. Confessions are to take place in the open, not in a confessional. Safety of the penitent and priest must be assured.
4. Frequently sanitize with disinfectant whatever people tend to touch in the churches: pews, door handles, etc.
5. During private prayer in church, maintain a safe distance from each other (6 feet or 2 meters).
6. Venerate icons and the Cross by bowing your head and with a sign of the cross or by prostrations. Do not kiss icons or the Cross.
7. Comply with the guidelines and prescriptions of governmental authorities (town, county, state, federal) regarding public gatherings and personal safety.

These norms are effective immediately after being published on Wednesday, March 19, 2020. We carefully follow developments, consult experts and will update our norms and regulations according to new information and circumstances.

God is calling us to a new and deeper spiritual awareness. We encourage you to stay united in the communion of the Holy Spirit! Pray! Stay vigilant! Sing, smile, and laugh! Exercise and read! Pay attention to your health and help people who are under risk in your family as well as in your neighborhood! Communicate and support each other in spirit and deed!

The blessing of the Lord be upon you!

+ Borys Gudziak

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from Metropolitan Cathedral of Immaculate Conception in Philadelphia, PA