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Spiritual Guidance in the Quarantine

September 2/15, 2020

Martyr Mamas of Caesarea in Cappadocia

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

Dear in Christ Clergy and Laity of the Mid-American Diocese,

We should first be grateful that in this time of the novel Coronavirus in our diocese, as opposed to other dioceses of our Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, none of our churches were officially closed by government order. To be sure, at the height of the pandemic, and in the early days when so little was known about the virus, our churches limited attendance in order to participate in the societal effort to slow the spread of the virus and avoid overwhelming the hospital system. But by and large, in every temple of the diocese, the Divine Services were held without interruption. This is something for which we should thank God! Orthodox Christians are first and foremost grateful for all things, believing that our merciful God always gives us what is best for our salvation.

As the pandemic has progressed it has become clearer what is safe and what is not safe, and most of our parishes have settled into a routine that allows the faithful to be present at the Divine Services with social/physical distancing restrictions and the use of masks. At the same time, almost all parishes are streaming Divine Services live over the internet for those who are not able to attend for health or other reasons. This is understandable and in some situations even good, but it is important for us now to beware of not losing what the Holy Church has given us for 2000 years.

If we must participate in the Divine Services remotely, via the internet, we must not forget that we are not observing a spectacle, but rather participating in the Divine Services of the Holy Church. The Liturgy is a sacrament whether we are present in person or virtually. In the temple all things are arranged to facilitate the worship and reverence of the faithful. At home none of this structure exists, and so we must purposefully create such a structure to facilitate piety. All distractions must be removed: televisions, radios, and cell phones turned off, pets put in a separate room, etc. One should dress appropriately, even if church is virtual. One should not eat or drink before the Liturgy. A candle or lamp should be lit. The family should gather together in one room, ideally where the icon corner of the home is located. This must be approached seriously – just as seriously as we would approach entering the House of Lord when we attend the Divine Services in person. For the reading of the Epistle, the Gospel, the Cherubic Hymn, the consecration of the Gifts (from the Creed to the blessing after the consecration: “And may the mercies of our Great Lord and Savior...”), the Lord’s Prayer, at the first bringing forth of the gifts and for the last bringing forth after the communing of the people we must stand.

Virtual participation in the Divine Services can not be equated with attending church in person. That is not a criticism of those who must worship virtually for legitimate reasons. Rather, this is meant as guidance to those who could attend in person but choose not to for the sake of convenience. We cannot allow our virtual participation in the Divine Services to become the norm. God willing, this pandemic will end, and we must be ready to again flock to the churches.

May the Lord bless and keep you, and strengthen your faith during this temporary time of quarantine.

With Love in our Lord Jesus Christ,

+ Archbishop Peter

Peter, Archbishop of Chicago & Mid-America