



Office of the Metropolitan

*312 Garfield Street
Johnstown, PA 15906*

May 8, 2020

Protocol No. 24/2020

Christos Voskrese! Christ is Risen! Christos Anesti!

Dear Reverend Clergy and Faithful of the Diocese,

Today I am writing to summarize how we got to where we are in dealing with Coronavirus and to let you know the process for the re-opening of our churches.

Prior to this Protocol, you received five Protocols from me dealing with the pandemic known as Covid-19 or Coronavirus starting with Protocol No. 7/2020 on March 12, 2020. When Protocol No. 7/2020 was sent out, it was still early in the pandemic and so less was known about the virus than now. These are some of the items mentioned in the Protocol:

- 1) "Anyone who is not feeling well should refrain from attending Church services until they are feeling better" in other words stay home and participate by watching on the internet.
- 2) Parishes were instructed to provide hand sanitizers in the Narthex of the Church.
- 3) "Venerating of icons and the hand cross is usually with a kiss. At this time it might be prudent to reduce or eliminate these activities. It is very difficult for me to tell a faithful individual who for many years has kissed these religious items to stop. It is a personal choice. If you wish to kiss an icon and/or the cross, go ahead. If you choose not to, just bow."
- 4) "The Kiss of Peace which is observed in many of our Diocesan parishes should be avoided."
- 5) "The Eucharist will be distributed as usual. Parishioners are reminded to approach the Chalice with their mouths wide open, in order to receive the Body and the Blood of our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ. This gift is the medicine of our lives. Either we believe that indeed it is the Body and the Blood of Christ or we don't. In the Orthodox understanding it is and so the Eucharist cannot be a vector/method/way of illness or death."
- 6) "Following Church services a thorough cleaning and disinfecting should be performed on all exposed surfaces (for example door knobs, candle stands, liturgical items, etc.)."

On March 18, things changed dramatically and so you received Protocol No. 8/2020 where I wrote: "I am writing you with a very heavy heart as the Coronavirus pandemic continues to affect all of us here in the United States and around the world. Earlier today the Chief Secretariat of the Holy and Sacred Synod following a meeting of the Ecumenical Patriarchate's Hierarchs in Constantinople issued a statement concerning the pandemic." In part it said "today, we universally declare our ecclesiastical resolution and mandate to cease all divine services, events, and rites, with the exception of private prayer in the church that will remain open, until the end of March. This restriction will be later reassessed, in accordance with the development of the pandemic caused by the virus."

The next day March 19, things changed again and so you received Protocol No. 9/2020. His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros, who is the Exarch of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in America had spoken with His

The American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese of North America

ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew about the complete closing of the churches and convinced the Patriarch to allow services to continue with minimum personnel. He wrote “we should allow for the divine services, including Divine Liturgies, to be celebrated in our Holy Churches behind closed doors, as is the case with the Monasteries. In this way we may broadcast through streaming and other means the aforementioned services for the spiritual benefit of our faithful.” Then I added “As we move forward until further notice, all divine services will be offered by the Priest and any other necessary few individuals in our Churches. The people are instructed to stay home and watch services that are being broadcast from either their own Church or from the Cathedral in Johnstown.”

On April 3 you received Protocol No. 11/2020 which included the Statement of the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America Executive Committee Concerning Holy Week and Pascha. Its three recommendations were:

- 1) “Services, celebrated by a maximum of five people consisting of a Priest, a Deacon, and/or Server(s), continue in the churches and may be streamed online for the faithful to pray from their homes.”
- 2) “None of the traditional material offerings are to be distributed to the faithful in any way, including palms and/or pussy willows, flowers, candles, eggs, etc.”
- 3) “Spiritual guidance may be heard over the phone, but the implementation of the Sacrament of Confession and the Prayer of Absolution remains at the discretion of the local Bishop.”

Several days later on April 7, Protocol No. 13/2020 was forwarded to you containing additional details concerning the remainder of Great Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha.

- 1) I gave my permission and my blessings to my brother Priests to hear the confessions of individuals over the phone. The Prayer of Absolution would be read over the penitent at a later date, once the crisis had passed.
- 2) We would not be distributing items that are traditionally distributed including pussy willows and palms. These items would be blessed on Palm Sunday and distributed later upon the people’s return to the churches.
- 3) Holy Unction – “When things return to normal and we are allowed to return to the churches, each parish can schedule a time to hold the Service of Holy Unction again with parishioners present so that all of us can be anointed with Holy Oil.”
- 4) Private prayers in the churches during off hours are discontinued. Priests are instructed to light votive candles for their flocks daily.
- 5) Priests are asked to distribute the Eucharist to the dying only.
- 6) Priests are asked to maintain a votive candle with the Paschal Light until the churches are re-opened.
- 7) Priests will not bless the traditional basket of foods. “Instead everyone will be provided with the appropriate prayers and will recite them in their homes following Divine Liturgy on Pascha. If families have any Holy Water in their homes, they may sprinkle their baskets following the prayers.”
- 8) “It is highly recommended that all the families of the Diocese printout the booklet created by Fr. William Bennett and Fr. Jonathan Bannon entitled **Holy Week From Home** and use it as a companion guide as they worship during the live streamed services.” This booklet was enthusiastically used not only by our parishioners, but also many people around the world. Permission was granted for it to be translated into Arabic (2 translations), German, Portuguese, and Dutch. **Holy Week From Home** ricocheted around the planet. We thank both Fr. William and Fr. Jonathan for their efforts.

The American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese of North America

ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

The opening up of our churches is a complicated matter with many factors being involved including governmental directives (federal, state, and local), medical circumstances (state and local), scientific information and ecclesiastical authority. Our Diocese is spread out over 13 American states and one Canadian province. Several states are starting to open up in varying degrees. Even within one state, we are seeing some counties opening up and others still under lockdown or stay at home directives. People have differing opinions of what they think about the situation and how fast or how slow we should open up the local area, including the churches. Many people are ready to go full steam ahead, while others are more hesitant. I personally am not sure what the answer is, but probably the right speed is somewhere in the middle (the Goldilocks position: not too fast, not too slow, just right).

I have been asked to join the Covid-19 Task Force for the Assembly of Bishops. This Task Force is composed of medical professionals, legal professionals, insurance professionals, and scientific professionals, all of whom are Orthodox. The invitation came because I am a Hierarchy of the Orthodox Church with a scientific background (over 20 years in Cardiovascular Research). The Task Force has access to a tremendous amount of detailed information that is not easily available to the general public. The Task Force has compiled and continues to compile on a daily basis information that Hierarches of the Orthodox Church here in America can use to make decisions on how and when to open up their churches, either as a group or individually.

As the Hierarchy of the Diocese it is my responsibility to protect all of you, both Clergy and Laity, wherever, whenever, and however I can. All of you are under my omophorion. I am your Shepherd and you are my beloved Sheep, my flock. I am responsible to God for all of you. I am accountable to Him. It has not been easy these last couple of months for any of us, but I believe we'll get through it. I know how difficult it has been not being able to go to church, to see each other, to hug each other, to pray together, to sing together, to receive the Eucharist. All of this was done to protect all of you. In order to begin our return to our churches we will follow this procedure in our Diocese until further notice.

- 1) The Priest will email to Metropolitan Gregory the following information which will be used to determine the when and the how for the church's re-opening:
 - A) Parish Name and Location
 - B) Number of Parishioners
 - C) Average Attendance on a Sunday
 - D) Seating Capacity of the Church
 - E) Current Status in Locale (red, yellow, green, etc.)
 - F) Current Limit of Crowd for a Church in the State
- 2) Once the information is submitted, Metropolitan Gregory will call the Priest to discuss the parish status and any provisions or conditions necessary to move forward.
- 3) Following the conversation, if all is ready and Metropolitan Gregory gives his permission and blessing, then the date of the re-opening will be announced.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me at the Chancery 1-814-539-9143.

May we continue to bask in the Light of the Risen Lord and may the Lord our God lift this pestilence from us quickly.

Working in the Vineyard of the Risen Lord with much agape,

+ Metropolitan Gregory

Metropolitan Gregory of Nyssa

The American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese of North America

ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE OF CONSTANTINOPLE