

Dear Clergy, Monastics and Laity of the Diocese of the Midwest,

It is with a heavy heart that I am issuing a directive to suspend all public services throughout the Diocese of the Midwest, effective March 25th at 12 noon. This applies to areas that are not under shutdown by the civil authorities. My directive is prompted by several factors:

- The directive of Governor Pritzker of Illinois to shut down the state of Illinois until April 7th. Public gatherings of churches were not exempted from this.
- In addition, the following states or areas have issued stay at home shelter orders*
 - Kansas City, St. Louis and surrounding areas
 - State of Ohio
 - State of Michigan
 - State of Indiana
 - State of Wisconsin
- I anticipate that other states or municipalities will follow and do the same.

*In the case of state shutdowns, I realize that the State of Ohio and maybe others have exempted religious gatherings from this. But, as Bishop, I have decided not to exempt our churches, in order to comply with the spirit of the shutdown; for people to stay home in order to slow down the spread of the virus.

- I have already given blessings to six parishes/missions in the Diocese to suspend services. Several priests have raised concerns about being able to limit their numbers to 10.
- I am also concerned about the age of many of our celebrating clergy who are over 60, and the health risks posed to them. I have suspended my travel and parish visitations as well, effective March 25th.

Given the above, it did not make sense to have some churches open and others closed; thus, this directive. **I wanted to let you know that what I am doing is consistent with what eight other dioceses in the Orthodox Church in America have done.**

What this means is that no Presanctified Liturgies or Divine Liturgies may be celebrated, even by a priest and his family at home or in the church. If you

have reserved any lambs for services, they should be consumed or cut to small size and dried up to be used for reserve sacrament. What may be celebrated are daily Lenten cycles of the liturgy of time: Matins, Lenten Hours, Typica, Vespers, and Compline. Akathists and Moliebens may also be offered in the home. For the feast of Annunciation, a Typica for the Feast may be offered. Please go to the Coronavirus Resource page on the DOM website to download most of these services. If the priest and his family live next door to the church, these may be offered in the church. Do live streams of these services, whether they be from the church or the home. With this directive, I am following what other Bishops in the OCA are doing.

I will issue a separate letter concerning visitation of sick, distribution of reserve sacrament, confession, baptisms, marriages and funerals.

The Holy Synod will be meeting next week to reassess how things are going, and possibly issue new directives. I am open to reconsidering my decision to not celebrate the Divine/Presanctified Liturgy. Other jurisdictions are allowing this with live streaming and the church being locked. I can understand how this is confusing to clergy and lay alike at the local level. At the Holy Synod meeting, I will raise the issue of allowing this to be done by the priest and a family member or a chanter to be livestreamed. For states that are on lockdown such as Illinois, Kansas City and St. Louis area, the states of Ohio and Michigan, I will not bless anyone leaving his or her home to drive to the church to chant responses.

As I said in my letter dated March 17th, I know many will be disappointed with this decision. I would encourage you to heed the counsel of His Grace Bishop Alexis of Bethesda given last week:

“Honor a physician with the honor due unto him for the uses which ye may have of him: for the Lord hath created him.” —Sirach 38:1

We are at present speaking about temporary measures for two weeks. People have vacations for longer periods of time. Not so long ago, people would commune once a year. I fail to see how two weeks of closed churches is something too much for people to bear, especially for people who love their neighbor as themselves. If one life, if one parishioner, is saved because of stricter measures, shouldn't we all have enough love to sacrifice even our own spiritual needs for that soul for two weeks? It is unthinkable that the servants of our Lord Who healed 'all manner of sickness and all manner of

disease among the people' could be less prudent regarding the physical well-being and health of those in their charge than the civil authorities."

I would also encourage you to read the book Exploring the Inner Universe by the Archimandrite Roman Braga. For now, we need to look at the life of Mary of Egypt, and the 40 day fast of our Lord in the wilderness as our guide. Once again, let us make our homes into houses of prayer; this will carry us through the crisis. Let us anticipate with joy when the day arrives that we will once again be able to gather around the altar of our Crucified Lord Jesus Christ Who is Risen, to receive His precious Body and Blood.

Finally, do remember to continue your financial stewardship responsibility to the parish to cover church expenses. Plus, our clergy are not being laid off, they are still working hard.

With love in Christ, the unworthy

+PAUL

Bishop of Chicago and the Midwest