

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Christ is Risen! Indeed He is Risen!

As we continue to celebrate the joyous Resurrection of Christ, we proclaim in churches world over: "Death no longer has dominion over us!" As St Paul wrote to the Romans, "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!" (Rom 8:38-39).

We know from hundreds of emails, phone calls, texts and personal communications, how much our people miss our beautiful church and our magnificent services, fellowship and gathering together as the Body of Christ. That time is coming my friends, and I believe soon!

Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Monday the statewide shutdown will end when "PAUSE" expires May 15, kicking off a pivotal week in New York's months-long fight against the coronavirus. A number of regions have met his requirements to begin reopening Friday, while others are on the cusp.

Certain low-risk businesses and recreational activities can resume across the state on May 15, Cuomo said.

"A new chapter starts today," the governor said Monday. "This is the next big step of this historic journey."

Cuomo has broken the state into 10 regions, each ranked across seven key metrics that must be met before they can begin to reopen. **As of Monday, three regions - the Southern Tier, Mohawk Valley and the Finger Lakes - had achieved all seven goals.** They'll have to finalize logistics before Friday, Cuomo said. Central New York and the North Country are close, checking six boxes.

In addition, the US Department of Justice issued the following to the States:

"Permitting similar opportunities for in-person gatherings of more than 10 individuals (in stores like Walmart), while at the same time prohibiting churches from gathering in groups of more than 10 - even with social distancing measures and other precautions - has impermissibly interfered with the church's free exercise of religion," the Department of Justice wrote in a statement.

"Unless it can be proven that its disparate treatment of religious gatherings is justified by a compelling reason and is pursued through the least restrictive means," the DOJ continued, "this disparate treatment violates the Free Exercise Clause, and the Orders may not be enforced against the church."

We must face these days of fear and testing - not passively accept them or capitulate to them. These can and should be days of renewed worship, rededicated service, care, friendship, work, and love. We must be alert to the stranger among us, and we must love one another and be kind to one another as God in Christ has been merciful to us (Ephesians 4:32-5:2).

To follow Christ is to be a people of hope. And our hope is not in vain, because it is invested in the creator God of the universe, who has extended Himself lavishly on behalf of His children. He is worthy of our trust, and He can aid us in conquering our fears. "Be of good cheer," our Lord said, just before his own horrific death on our behalf, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

While maintaining all of the Liturgical Services of our parish with "skeletal crew", we are continuing our efforts in cleaning and disinfecting our Sacred Items, church, pews, hall, Sunday school classrooms, and all publicly used areas, and the entire facility with high grade professional MPC A2Z (COVID – 19 rated by CDC) disinfectant cleaner. All of those items and areas are, and will continue to be cleaned and disinfected before and after all the services.

In keeping with the newly released Diocese of New York and New Jersey Diocesan Directives on the Gradual Re-Opening of Diocesan Churches, Issued May 8, 2020, each parish, led by the priest and assisted by the parish council, must answer the “Questions to Ask Before Re-Opening”, before the hierarch will bless its advancement to the next stage of re-opening.

1. Do the civil directives allow for re-opening? **A. YES**
2. Is the priest a member of the vulnerable population as defined by the civil authorities (e.g., is he over 65 years of age? Does he have pre-existing medical conditions?)? Does he has a wife or household member who works in healthcare who is in contact with COVID-19 patients? **A. NO**
3. Has the church been thoroughly cleaned? Is a plan in place for the regular cleaning of the church after each service? **A. YES**
4. Does the church have a plan to accommodate faithful in the church building that meets the requirements for social distancing? Does the choir have such a plan? **A. YES**
5. Does the church have necessary equipment for re-opening (hand sanitizer, cleaning supplies, personal protection equipment / PPE)? **A. YES**
6. Does the church have the necessary personnel trained to assist in the services (e.g., opening church doors, cleaning surfaces as necessary during a service, assisting at Holy Communion, etc.)? **A. YES**
7. Does the church have a plan to make sure that all members of the congregation who are able to come to services, have the opportunity to do so? **A. YES**
8. Is a plan in place for the distribution of Holy Communion? **A. YES**

Your Parish Council together with myself, as a Rector, is hard at work to implement all the necessary steps to expedite “Careful increase of the number of parishioners to liturgical cohort according to the limits set by civil directives; allowance for Baptisms, Receptions of Converts, in person Confessions, Marriages, with equivalent loosening for limits on attendance.”

“A parish cannot advance through multiple stages at once. At this time there are three general approaches from which a priest may choose to pursue the gradual re-opening of the church. The blessing of the diocesan bishop must be obtained for each parish to pursue any one of these options.” (Diocese of New York and New Jersey Diocesan Directives on the Gradual Re-Opening of Diocesan Churches, Issued May 8, 2020, p.1,2)

I commend members of our parish council and the faithful who helped the clergy in numerous ways during this crisis, through assisting with phone calls to the faithful, emails, wellness checks, technological advises, as well as, serving and singing for the benefit and “on behalf” of the entire community. May our Lord bless us with patience as we tread an unfamiliar pathway. Your continued support of the ongoing work of Christ’s Holy Church is greatly appreciated.

We express our gratitude to our “skeletal crew” of clergy, servers, readers and singers, who on behalf of our entire parish family, welcomed and assisted with Archbishop Michael’s visit and Hierarchical services, this past weekend. Hierarchical Divine Liturgy on Saturday honoring Vladyko Michael’s 10th Anniversary of Episcopal Consecration, Great Vespers on Saturday, and Hierarchical Divine Liturgy on Sunday, honoring all mothers (both living and departed), were truly beautiful and flawless.

Thanks to Matushka Alexandra Karlgut (Dn. Stephan’s wife) we are able to share some photographs she took, during services. Thanks to Matushka Michele Holowatch, we are able to share three sermons of Archbishop Michael she recorded during those services, and that are posted on Diocesan Website.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=keVSVi2XnkY#action=share>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vugr267DsH0&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ8NiLVB5o4&feature=youtu.be>

Thanks to our President Subdeacon Mike Pylypsiw (who is in church at every service) and Financial team (including Paul Farbanish, Bill Scheider and Oksana Karlgut), our financial operations of receiving, recording and reconciling of parishioners stewardship contributions and of all the accounts, continued without interruption and with excellence, on the weekly basis, through last three months of pandemic.

We know there are many people who have been anxious to resume church attendance and the reception of the Holy Eucharist. We are working hard to begin the process of making that happen in our parish. While we would love to go back to things the way they were immediately, it will take careful planning to ensure that our beloved parish's plan is successful.

As we prepare to resume Liturgical fullness of life in our parish, I would like to encourage everyone to watch a wonderful video called "Beautiful Short Film Explaining the Orthodox Liturgy in English", created and produced by a good friend and a former student (St. Tikhon's Seminary) Fr. Alexander Koranda, so that we may enter deeper and with greater understanding into Mystery of the Divine Liturgy.

<https://russian-faith.com/explaining-orthodoxy/beautiful-short-film-explaining-russian-orthodox-liturgy-english-n3144>

I pray you are in good health and are taking care of yourselves and one another. First and foremost, I want to thank all our parishioners for their tireless efforts during the past few months in adapting to this unprecedented situation. All have moved outside their personal comfort zone and areas of experience to continue to be engaged with their respective roles of being our parish family. Thank you for your faithfulness to your calling of being the People of Hope - Orthodox Christians!

We are profoundly grateful to our parishioners and friends for their generosity and continued financial commitment to our parish, as stewards of our church. An incredible amount of good works during these difficult times is only possible due to your continued and faithful generosity. It is my belief that we will come out of this crisis stronger and more united than ever before, as a Bride of Christ – His Holy Church!

St. Paul tells us in his Epistle to The Romans, that we are: "One Body in Christ, and each of us a member of one another." {Romans 12:5}

As we face this current crisis, we must remember always that we are the Body of Christ -- and as such, we strive to be united in love and prayers with one another and for one another, especially on occasions when we cannot be together in person.

May God continue to bless all of us and our brothers and sisters here and throughout the world!

With love in Risen Christ,
Fr. Alexey