

What Is Needed for Orthodox Parishes to Resume Normal Liturgical Life?

As we approach the re-opening of Orthodox Christian parishes in the U.S. and Canada, various Orthodox Jurisdictions have put forward guidelines that represent substantial changes in Orthodox practice and fellowship. An example from the Greek Archdiocese is [here](#). Among the changes that have been noted are:

- Everyone over the age of 2 must wear a mask at all times on church grounds
- Rigid enforcement of social distancing during the Divine Liturgy, with strict controls on attendance
- No kissing icons
- No kissing the priest's hand
- No individual lighting of candles
- In some dioceses, the method of receiving the Eucharist is by appointment or is altered in other ways
- No fellowship or coffee hour
- No classes or youth activities
- Baptisms and marriages appear to be on hold in many dioceses

To say the least, these are substantial changes in the practice of the Orthodox faith. Among other impacts, we are limiting access to communion, creating a nightmare for parents of young kids trying to keep them still and masked, and isolating us from the fellowship of our fellow Orthodox Christians at a time of severe psychological and economic trauma.

Further, if you thought Evangelism was challenging before, under these conditions it is going to be nigh unto impossible. How can one enter into the life of the Church as a catechumen if attendance at Divine Liturgy is a once-a-month privilege? Is catechism class via Zoom really an effective way to educate catechumens and our own children? The optics of the "new parish normal" are just not good. It can be difficult to claim that our Orthodox Jurisdictions are truly the "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" when we turn away those seeking Jesus while visibly fearing death to such a degree.

From the perspective of Orthodox Faith and practice, these changes have been fully covered by other writers, among them monks, priests and hierarchs. Here are a few examples:

- [A DEADLY VIRUS AND AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL NIGHTMARE](#)
- [MOUNT ATHOS: THIS PANDEMIC MUST HAVE NO INFLUENCE ON PARTICIPATION IN THE HOLY MYSTERIES](#)
- [Coronavirus and the Triumph of Orthodoxy \(What Saints Said & Bishops Tried to Hide\)](#)
- [Patriarch Daniel: The Holy Eucharist is not and can never be a source of sickness and death](#)

Orthodox Hierarchs have emphasized love of neighbor as the reason why these changes are necessary. As Orthodox Christians, we want to guard against infecting others. That may be true. But it is also quite clear, particularly in the Greek Archdiocese, that the fear of legal liability is at work. The Greek Archdiocese requires those attending liturgies to agree to [four bullet](#) points prior to entering the church. Of those four, two have to do with potential legal liability:

- I acknowledge that while safety measures are being taken by the church, it cannot guarantee the safety of every person present.

- I consent to hold the church harmless against any damages or claims regarding my voluntary presence here.

I am sure the hierarchs worry for the health of their flocks. But I am equally sure that lawyers have had a heavy hand in changing the way the Orthodox Faith will be practiced in North America for the foreseeable future.

For purposes of this article, I am not interested in the appropriateness of any of these changes per se. The bishops have spoken, and they are the only ones that matter in this regard.

Before we continue to the point of this article, let's summarize where we are with the Coronavirus pandemic:

- The CDC's latest best estimate indicates the virus kills less than 0.3 percent of people infected by it. This is far lower than the infection fatality rates (IFRs) assumed by the alarming projections that drove the initial government (and church) response to the epidemic. Given the low fatality rate for this virus, many experts are questioning whether the "stay-at-home" orders and business lockdowns were either necessary or even effective.
- The CDC currently estimates that 35 percent of all Covid-19 infections are asymptomatic.
- There is evidence that asymptomatic carriers pose much less risk of spread than previously feared.
- The CDC now says coronavirus "does not spread easily on surfaces." Icons, in addition to being Holy, are surfaces.
- The risk to children appears negligible, as confirmed by many nations around the world re-opening schools.
- **62 percent** of all Covid-19 deaths were in just **six states** in which governors ordered nursing home facilities to house Covid-19 patients, thus spreading the infection to the most vulnerable population.
- At the peak, New York City still had around 1 in 6 hospital beds open and around 1 in 10 ICU beds open. The "curve" was flattened all over the country to the point that no hospital system was ever overwhelmed. In fact, hundreds of millions of dollars were spent on temporary hospitals which saw few to no patients and which have already been torn down. The results in Canada were the same.
- Finally – over 43,000 medical staff lost their jobs in the first month of the lockdown alone. More were furloughed as the economic catastrophe deepened. The expected waves of Covid patients never materialized, while a terrified population increasingly succumbed to treatable diseases that were never diagnosed.

All of the above is incredibly good news for which to ***God be all the Glory.***

But despite all of those blessings, the canonical Orthodox Hierarchs have mandated that we open up parishes with major changes to Orthodox liturgical practice. Divine Liturgies open only to a fraction of the Faithful, masks on three-year-old's, no kissing icons, and no Christian fellowship at a time when millions are out of work and suicide rates are spiking.

The assumption is that these changes are temporary in nature. We are in a crisis, and these changes are the church's loving response to protect the Faithful. But that raises a very, very important question that

needs to be put to every Orthodox hierarch in North America – ***what is it going to take to reverse these deformations of parish life?***

If the changes are temporary in the face of a crisis, then by what measure do we judge the crisis to have abated enough that we can go back to the traditional practice of the Orthodox Faith?

This is vital to know, because depending on the answers, some or all of the current alterations to Orthodoxy may, in fact, ***be permanent or at the very least with us for years to come***. It is unlikely that we will ever get a vaccine for Covid, as one has never been approved for use in the US or UK against any other forms of coronavirus. Even if we get a vaccine, it is unlikely to be any more effective than the current “flu shot.” That will leave a substantial risk of infection, even for those who have been vaccinated. Therefore, there will be some level of risk for the foreseeable future, and possibly, till the Second Coming. Beyond Covid-19, there are other communicable diseases now and will be more in the future. Given the involvement of lawyers in crafting policy, what level of risk is low enough to fully return to Orthodox liturgical and parish life?

If you are an Orthodox Christian, **please reach out to your ruling hierarch and ask what conditions must be met for us to fully practice our faith**. Only the bishops can tell us that. As a Church, we need a plan and accountability to carry it through. The alternative is to drift forward with the possibility that we will lose authentic Orthodox Faith and practice to the *detriment* of millions of souls.