



Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese in America

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Metropolitan Tikhon
Locum Tenens of Boston, New England
and the Albanian Archdiocese

Igumen Nikodhim
Interim Chancellor

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To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy and Faithful of the Albanian Archdiocese,

Christ is Risen!

We have just celebrated the Midfeast of Pentecost and continue to rejoice in the glory of the resurrection of Christ. At the same time, we are experiencing the gradual return to regular Church life made possible by the recent increase of vaccinations, the decrease in the number of CoVID cases, and the loosening of some of the directives from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and local civil authorities.

In light of these developments, I am providing the following **general principles** to guide the clergy and the parishes of the Albanian Archdiocese in navigating the next stages of reopening.

- 1) *Responsibility of the Rector and Parish Council.* As you have done so well for the past 15 months, I am relying on the rector or priest in charge of your community to work directly with the parish council to determine the specific application these guidelines in your setting. All of you have accomplished this extremely well over the past 15 months so I have full confidence that, working together, you will find the most fitting and pastorally-sound approach for your context.
- 2) *Guidance from the Civil authorities.* At the same time, the Holy Synod has consistently maintained the principle that anything we implement in our dioceses should be guided by the directives established by your state and local governments and by your local health authorities. This principle remains in force as we move forward but it should be clearly understood by all that in no way does this principle imply that the Church is abdicating any of her authority in ecclesiastical matters.
- 3) *A Christian Attitude.* It is important to maintain the unity and the peace of the local parish by several means: a) the community as a whole should come to an agreement on how to proceed in their particular context without reference to what may be happening in other parishes or other dioceses; b) there should be an understanding that all of the specific measures implemented in your community are intended for the health and safety of all; c) There should be no judgement or condemnation of others concerning issues such as masks, social distancing, or whether they are vaccinated or unvaccinated.
- 4) *Concerning Vaccines.* With respect to the question of vaccines, I provide here in full a statement made by His Eminence, Archbishop Alexander, which reflects my own position for this diocese: *First and foremost, receiving a COVID vaccine is a choice - nobody should feel compelled or coerced to receive the vaccine. It is clear that the ethical issues surrounding COVID vaccines specifically are no less complex than the broader issues related to modern medicine in general. Our hierarchs, along with hierarchs throughout the Orthodox world, have broadly embraced the morality of COVID vaccinations to aid in the alleviation of suffering and death. In an effort to maintain unity within our communities, clergy in the diocese should refrain from vocalizing positions that cast a pall on the morality of the various COVID vaccines - sowing dissent among the faithful in the process. If members of the clergy question the use of the vaccine or face coverings (for one reason or another), they are to refrain from sharing these opinions. The faithful should be encouraged (likewise) to hold these types of opinions privately and to treat all with charity and love.*

- 5) *Concerning Masks.* With respect to masks, I provide the following principles, also provided by His Eminence, Archbishop Alexander
- a. *While the current CDC guidance encourages the removal of masks for the vaccinated only, I recognize the challenge of maintaining separate standards for the vaccinated and unvaccinated; therefore separate masking standards for the vaccinated and unvaccinated will not be established.*
 - b. *Since there cannot be an expectation that the unvaccinated will wear masks to prevent the spread of COVID, it should be stressed to parishioners that everyone is welcome (and encouraged) to continue wearing face coverings if there is any level of discomfort with the new guidance. In short, while the Archbishop blesses cessation of masking requirements in the parish, every priest should be quite clear with their parishioners that everyone may continue wearing face coverings.*
 - c. *There will be no tolerance for “mask shaming” toward those who choose to continue wearing them. Additionally, if parishioners are not comfortable with the cessation of precautions, some pastoral accommodation should be sought.*

With the above principles in mind, I offer the following further clarifications:

1. It is no longer required to check temperatures upon entry unless the community would prefer to maintain this as an extra precaution. You should also continue to have a sign-in list, should notifications be necessary.
2. If the community as a whole, for the sake of solidarity, wishes to maintain the mask requirement for all parishioners, this would be blessed.
3. Social distancing requirements in the various geographic regions will vary so each parish should adapt those requirements in a way that is appropriate to their physical structure and the needs of the faithful. If it is felt that 6 foot distancing should be maintained, you may do so. If you are able to reduce to 3 foot distancing, you may do so. And if you are permitted by the civil directives, you may remove all social distancing requirements.
4. Should there be an outbreak or exposure in the parish, the priest should contact the Chancellor for further guidance and/or consultation with the bishop.
5. While you may continue to distribute Communion as you have under the past CoVID protocols, please remember that these were always intended to be a temporary measures intended to relieve anxiety for some. It would be good to begin informing the faithful that, as the situation continues to improve, we will return to the traditional practice of using one spoon for communion.
6. Limited coffee hours and small in-person gatherings (e.g. parish council meetings, Bible studies, etc.) may be organized at your discretion but should only take place if they can be done outdoors or in a large enough space to allow social distancing.
7. You have my blessing to implement these modified procedures as soon your state and locality approve such actions. There is no need to submit an additional request for blessing to me for anything related to the above. However, you will need to submit a request if you are proposing more significant changes, such as holding large parish events like bazaars, etc.

I am grateful for your continued attention in these matters.

Yours in the Risen Lord,



+TIKHON
Archbishop of Washington
Metropolitan of All America and Canada