



Ecumenical Patriarchate - Οἰκουμενικὸν Πατριαρχεῖον
Τερὰ Ἀρχιεπισκοπῆ Θεσσαλῶν καὶ Μεγάλῃς Βρεταννίας
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Thyateira & Great Britain

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Message of H.E. Archbishop Nikitas

Beloved Brothers and coworkers in the Lord's vineyard:

"God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with the tumult" (Psalm 46:1-3).

Yesterday was the Feast of the Veneration of the Cross - the midpoint of Holy and Great Lent. It was a day that all of us, clergy and laity, anticipated together. We waited to look upon the Life-Giving Cross and to gain strength, so that we might continue the journey to Pascha. We waited to look upon the Cross and ask for healing, mercy and grace. The churches would have been overflowing and filled with people. Sadly, the churches were closed and empty. But that does not mean that the message of the Cross was absent for us and for the world. The message of faith, hope and love continues to pour out and fill the universe because of Christ.

There is no need to tell you that we are facing difficult and challenging times. The empty streets and empty hearts of the people are testimony to this. It is, though, also a time when we as clergy must rise to our calling as the servants and priests of God. "For everything there is a season", as the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds, and now is the hour when we must step forward and minister to a suffering world.

There are those searching for answers to the multitude of questions concerning the coronavirus. To most of their questions, we have no answers, as we are not ourselves medical professionals. Nevertheless, we are charged with responding to faltering or despondent hearts in order to fill them with comfort, hope and love, especially when people say to us "how can God do this to our world?". It is during this crisis of faith that we must stand strong and be the ballast amidst the storms that have overwhelmed us. Certainly, in the history of the Church those who came before us also faced great challenges and crises, and God sent saintly people to minister to those in need. The great acts and mercy of God were seen when He raised up the Judges to save His people. In difficult times of famine, disease and turbulence, God responds to the cries and pleas of the faithful; it is our duty to humble ourselves and pray. Our heavenly Father may choose to work a great miracle and deliver us immediately from this plague, or He may allow nature to run its course. No matter what will happen, we must stand firm, as Christians and people of the Church. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might (Eph. 6:10)". "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual

songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Col.3: 18). Pray that God will hear our petitions and cries to Him.

As your father, I am concerned about your personal health and wellbeing. I have asked the older clergy to stay home and enter a period of self-isolation. The same has been requested of those who are ill or have health issues. We are able to best serve Christ and His people when we look after our own health. Therefore, please do not put yourself at risk, but conduct yourselves to the best of your ability under the present circumstances, using logic and reason to guide you. We do not need heroes - we need people of prayer and love, who can minister and share Christ with others. From your homes and mobile phones, call and offer comfort and support to one another. Do not forget that there are celibate clergy who have no family here. They may feel alone and isolated. Do not allow them to fall into depression because they feel the pains of separation and sadness. Let them and your brethren know that someone does care about them.

Along with the challenges that you and your family may face, you are also the spiritual fathers to the faithful. As shepherds of the local flocks and communities, you are called to care for and tend the flock. As you have faithfully served them over the years, continue to do so, having the image of the "least of the brethren" before you.

"Stretch forth your hand to the poor, so that your blessing may be complete.

Give graciously to all the living and withhold not kindness from the dead.

Do not fail those who weep, but mourn with those who mourn.

Do not shrink from visiting a sick man, because for such deeds you will be loved, in all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin" (Sirach 7: 31-36).

Bearing in mind all the above, I would like to offer some thoughts for your consideration:

- The church, although closed to the public for services, should remain open, so people may come to pray and ask God to heal our fallen world and guide the professionals to find a cure for COVID-19.
- The Parish is the spiritual family of the faithful and family members assist and help one another, including care and consideration of the challenges that depression may bring. Something as simple as a kind word of acknowledgement and a "wave" can provide support and encouragement.
- Those who can and want, should bring food (especially non-perishable items) to the church. These can be shared with others who may be in need.
- Each parish should develop action teams to address the needs and challenges of the community.
- These small teams should gather the names of people who are at increased risk (the elderly, the sick, the poor) and call them on a regular basis.
- The teams can shop and deliver food and other necessities to those who are unable to go out.
- In cases where people have few or no personal resources, the team can distribute items that have been donated and brought to the church by making deliveries to those who are alone.
- Remember that the virus has attacked our world, not just our community. The resources we have should be shared with any and all in need.

- Please do not hoard and do not buy what you do not need. It is especially important for the Church to demonstrate and teach sensitivity to this aspect of the present crisis.

Please note that the Archdiocesan office remains open and we are here to serve you. As I remember you in my prayers, please also remember our Patriarch and all of God's people. Pray for the doctors, health-care workers, researchers, and for those who suffer and those who mourn. Ask the Holy Unmercenaries to intercede for us. May Christ heal and save us.

With paternal love and prayers,

✠ N I K I T A S Archbishop of Thyateira and Great Britain