

Word of Consolation for the Pandemic

Elder Zacharias Zachariou
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Many people are in confusion and others panic because of the threat of the Coronavirus epidemic that spread in the whole world. I think, however, that this should not happen, for whatever God does with us, He does it out of love. The God of Christians is a good God, a God of mercy and lovingkindness, 'Who loveth mankind'. God created us out of His goodness in order to share His life and even His glory with us. When we fell into sin, He allowed death to enter our life again out of goodness, so that we may not become immortal in our wickedness, but to seek for a way of salvation. Although we have fallen, God has never stopped to provide for us, not only material goods in order to sustain our race, but He also sent prophets and righteous, preparing His way so that He might come and solve our tragedy, and bring eternal salvation through the Cross and Resurrection of His inconceivable love. He came and took upon Himself the curse of sin, and He showed His love to the end: 'Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end' (John 13:1). All the things that God did when He created us, when He provided goods in order to sustain the world, when He prepared His way for Him to come on earth, when He came Himself in person and wrought our salvation in such an awesome way, all these things He did out of goodness. His goodness is boundless. He saves us and is so longsuffering towards us, waiting until we 'come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim. 2:4) and bring true repentance, so that we may be with Him for all eternity. Thus, at every stage of His relationship with man, our God shows only His goodness and mercy, 'which is better than life' (Ps. 63:3); goodness is His Nature and He does all things for the benefit and salvation of man.

Consequently, when He shall come again to judge the world, will a different God judge it? Will it not be the same good God, the God of mercy and lovingkindness, Who loves mankind? Let us be certain that we shall not appear before any other God than Him Who created us and saved us. And so, it is again with the same mercy and love that He will judge us. For this reason, we should neither panic nor waver, for it will be the same God that will receive us

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in the other life and will judge us with the same kindness and compassion. Some fear that the hour of their end has come. This plague of Coronavirus has also a positive aspect, because we have a few weeks from the moment it will assail us until our end. Therefore, we can dedicate this time to prepare ourselves for our meeting with God, so that our departure may not occur unexpectedly and without preparation, but after we have run through our whole life each time we stand in prayer before God, at times with thanksgiving unto the end for all the things God has done for us and at other times with repentance, seeking the forgiveness of our transgressions. Nothing can harm us with such a God, Who allows all things out of His goodness. We must simply keep thanksgiving unto the end and the humble prayer of repentance for the forgiveness of our sins.

As for myself, this plague is helping me. I longed to find again the prayer I had before, with which I can run through my whole life from my birth until now, thanking God for all His benefits 'whereof I know and whereof I know not'; and also, with which I can run through my whole life repenting for all my sins and transgressions. It is wonderful to be able to run through your life praying, bringing all things before God with persistence in prayer. Then you feel that your life is redeemed. This is why this situation is truly helping me. I am not panicking but 'I will be sorry for my sin' (Ps. 38:18).

We must see the goodness of God in all the things that are happening now. The Holy Fathers did see His lovingkindness. A similar epidemic occurred in the 4th century in the Egyptian desert, which harvested more than a third of the monks, and the Fathers were saying with great inspiration that, 'God is harvesting souls of saints for His Kingdom,' and they did not waver. The Lord Himself speaks in the Gospel about the last days, about the trials and afflictions which the world will go through before His Second Coming. However, we discern neither morbid sadness nor despair in His words. The Lord Who prayed in the garden of Gethsemane with a sweat of blood for

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the salvation of the whole world, says that when we see the terrible things that precede His Second Coming, we should lift up our heads with inspiration, for our redemption draws nigh (cf. Luke 21:28). Some tell me, 'May God extend His helping hand.' But this is precisely the hand of God. He desires and works our salvation 'at sundry times and in divers manners' (Heb. 1:1): 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work' (John 5:17). This virus may be a means that God uses in order to bring many to themselves and to repentance, and to harvest many ready souls for His eternal Kingdom. Therefore, for those who surrender and entrust themselves to the Providence of God all will contribute for their good: 'All things work together for good to them that love God' (Rom. 8:28).

Thus, there is no room for morbid dismay. Neither should we resist the measures that the government is taking in order to diminish the spreading of the afflictions we see in the lives of so many people. It is wrong to go against the authorities. We should do whatever the Government says, because they are not asking for us to deny our faith, they are only asking us to take a few measures for the common welfare of all people, so that this trial may pass, and this is not at all unreasonable. Some people take it too confessionally, they raise flags and play the martyrs and the confessors. For us there is no doubt: we shall show pure submission to the orders of the Government. It is unfair to disobey the Government since, when we fall ill, it is to their hospitals that we run and they are the ones who undertake all the expenses and our care. Why not listen to them?

This is the ethos of Christ that God showed in His life on earth and this is the apostolic commandment that we have received: '...be subject to principalities and powers, obey magistrates, be ready to every good work, speak evil of no man, be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing all meekness unto all men' (cf. Tit. 3: 1-2); and 'Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme...' (see 1 Pet. 2:13-17). If we do not obey our governors who are not asking much, how will we obey God, Who gives us a divine law, which is far more sublime than any human law? If we keep the law of God we are above human laws, as the apologists of the 2nd century said during the Roman Empire which was persecuting the Christians. It is surprising to see in the country where we live, in the United Kingdom, that the footballers show such unders-



tanding and discernment so as to be the first to withdraw from their activities with docility towards the indications of the Government to take prophylactic measures. It would be sad for us, people of faith, to fail reaching the measure of the footballers and showing the same docility towards the authorities for which our Church prays.

If they ask us to stop our Church services, let us simply surrender and bless the Providence of God. Besides, this reminds us of an old tradition that the Fathers had in Palestine: in Great Lent, on the Sunday of Cheese fare, after the mutual forgiveness, they would go out in the desert for forty days without Liturgy; they would only continue in fasting and prayer so as to prepare and return on Palm Sunday to celebrate in a godly way the Passion and the Resurrection of the Lord. And so, our present circumstances force us to live again that which existed of old in the bosom of the Church. That is to say, they force us to live a more hesychastic life, with more prayer, which will however make up for the lack of the Divine Liturgy and will prepare us to celebrate with greater desire and inspiration the Passion and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus, we will turn this plague into a triumph of hesychasm. In any case, whatever God allows in our life is out of His goodness for the well-being of man, for He never wants His creature to be harmed in any way.

Certainly, if we will be deprived of the Divine Liturgy for a longer period of time, we can endure it. What do we receive in the Liturgy? We partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, which are filled with His grace. This is a great honour and benefit for us, but we also receive the grace of God in many other ways. When we practice hesychastic prayer, we abide in the Presence of God with the

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Message of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Regarding COVID-19

18 March 2020 · Delivered in English
Available on YouTube via goarch.org

Brother hierarchs and beloved children in the Lord,

From the Phanar, from the heart of the Queen of Cities, from the City of the Great Church and of Haghia Sophia, we are communicating with each and every one of you – women, men, and children – because of the unprecedented conditions and tribulation that we are facing as a human race as a result of the global threat posed by the pandemic of the new coronavirus, called Covid-19.

The voice of the Church, of the Mother Church, cannot be silent in such times. Our words, then, take the form we have learned through the ages: through the liturgy and through instruction, with encouragement and consolation.

We sincerely thank all those who struggle with self-sacrifice, even neglecting themselves and their families, including:

Medical and nursing professionals at the front lines, beside our brothers and sisters who are suffering,

Researchers and scientists searching for proper medication and vaccination to deliver us from this virus, but also

All those actively working hard to address this pandemic.

Your contribution is invaluable. It is an offering to all of society. It is a sacrifice that deserves every honor and gratitude. All of us thank you and applaud you, not only from the windows of our homes, but everywhere and at all times. Our thoughts and our prayers are with you.

In this struggle, our appointed states, governments and appropriate health authorities have the primary responsibility for planning, confronting and overcoming this crisis. We might describe them as Commanders on the battlefield against an invisible, but now well-known, enemy. An enemy that has turned against humanity.

The burden of the responsibility, that they bear on their shoulders, by necessity demands the cooperation of us all.

Ecumenical
Patriarch
Bartholomew



Now is the time of personal and social responsibility.

Therefore, our dear children, we entreat you as your spiritual father to respond faithfully and patiently to all the difficult but necessary measures proposed by our health authorities and nations. Everything is being done for our protection, for our common good, in order to contain the spread of this virus. Our liberation from this distress depends entirely on our own cooperation.

Perhaps some of you have felt that these drastic measures undermine or harm our faith.

However, that which is at stake is not our faith – it is the faithful.

It is not Christ – it is our Christians.

It is not the divine-man – but human beings.

Our faith is firmly established in the roots of our culture. Our faith is a living faith, and there is no exceptional circumstance that can limit or suppress it. What must be limited and suppressed in these extraordinary circumstances are gatherings and large congregations of people. Let us remain in our homes. Let us be careful and protect

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those around us. And there, from our homes, strengthened by the power of our spiritual unity, let each and every one of us pray for all humankind.

We will pass through this period like a journey through the desert to reach the Promised Land, where science, by the grace of God, will overcome this virus.

We are certain that, through our prayers as well, science will indeed prevail. So it is good for us to remain united in spirit, as we continue the struggle of repentance and holiness.

We see our neighbors suffering from the consequences of the virus, while others have already fallen and departed from among us. Our Church hopes and prays for the

healing of the sick, for the souls of the departed, and for courage and strength to the families of the afflicted.

This trial, too, shall pass. The clouds will clear, and the Sun of Righteousness will eliminate the deadly effect of the virus. But our lives will have changed forever. This trial is an opportunity for us to change for the better. In the direction of establishing love and solidarity.

Beloved children in the Lord, may the blessing of the Lord, through the intercessions of the All-Holy Mother of God, accompany us in our journey, transform our voluntary isolation into genuine communion, and become our prayer and destination to appreciate the meaning of this, so that we may return to that which is true, to that which is pleasing to God! Have courage! And may God be with us! ❖

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mind in the heart calling upon the holy Name of Christ. The Divine Name brings us the grace of Christ because it is inseparable from His Person and leads us into His Presence. This Presence of Christ which is purifying, cleanses us from our transgressions and sins, it renews and illumines our heart so that the image of God our Saviour, Christ, may be formed therein.

If we shall not have Easter in the Church, let us remember that every contact with Christ is Easter. We receive grace in the Divine Liturgy because the Lord Jesus is present in it, He performs the sacrament and He is the One imparted to the faithful. However, when we invoke His Name, we enter the same Presence of Christ and receive the same grace. Therefore, if we are deprived of the Liturgy, we always have His Name, we are not deprived of the Lord. Moreover, we also have His word, especially His Gospel. If His word dwells continually in our heart, if we study it and pray it, if it becomes our language with which we speak to God as He spoke to us, then we shall have again the grace of the Lord. For His words are words of eternal life (John 6:68), and the same mystery is performed, we receive His grace and are sanctified.

Furthermore, each time we show kindness to our brethren the Lord is well-pleased, He considers that we did it in His Name and He rewards us. We show kindness to our brethren and the Lord rewards us with His grace. This is another way in which we can live in the Presence of the Lord. We can have the grace of the Lord through fasting, almsgiving and every good deed. So, if we are forced to avoid gathering in Church, we can also be united in spirit

in these holy virtues which are known within the Body of Christ, the holy Church, and which preserve the unity of the faithful with Christ and with the other members of His Body. All the things we do for God is a Liturgy, for they minister unto our salvation. The Liturgy is the great event of the life of the Church, wherein the faithful have the possibility to exchange their little life with the boundless life of God. However, the power of this event depends on the preparation we perform before, through all the things we have mentioned, through prayer, good deeds, fasting, love for neighbour, repentance.

Therefore, my dear brethren, it is not necessary to make heroic confessions against the Government for the prophylactic measures that it takes for the good of all people. Neither should we despair, but only wisely machinate ways so as not to lose our living communication with the Person of Christ. Nothing can harm us, we must simply be patient for a certain period of time and God will see our patience, take away every obstacle, every temptation and we shall again see the dawn of joyful days, and we shall celebrate our common hope and love that we have in Christ Jesus. ❖



Elder Zacharias

Lenten “Distancing”

Matushka Donna Farley
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Church closed. Community members scattered widely. Weeks without normal daily and weekly routine, without spiritual instruction, without icons to venerate, without Sunday eucharist, without community agape meals.

This was the deliberate practice of the monastery of Abba Zosima in the sixth century Palestinian desert, every Lent. On the Sunday of Forgiveness, the brethren would prostrate themselves to each other and ask forgiveness and receive a blessing from their abbot. Then each would take whatever food he felt he needed for himself and walk out into the desert, singing “The Lord is my light and my Saviour; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defender of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 26:1) For the next forty days, deliberately, each one would turn away if they spotted any other of their brothers on the horizon.

When we speak of the desert, we think of the sun blazing in hard clear skies over endless sand dunes. The desert Zosima and his fellows entered was more hard earth and scrub, but they did not go there for a particular kind of landscape. They went to a desert, which means a deserted place, a place empty of human beings. Like those deserted, eerily empty streets of Wuhan or Italy we have seen on TV.

The monks chose to enter Lenten isolation, every year; but in this 2020 pandemic, Lenten isolation is being thrust upon us, upon Christians all over the world.

For us Orthodox Christian lay people, up to this year, Lent has generally been the opposite of a desert experience. Last year, as for many centuries before, we came to more services, not fewer. PreSanctified Liturgies on Wednesday and Friday, Sunday of Orthodoxy vespers with other parishes, canons and akathists, Lenten retreats, healing services... we saw more of our fellow members than we did throughout the rest of the year.

That was last year, and all the years previous that most of us can remember in our lifetime. The Year of Our Lord 2020, will send all of us into a kind of Lenten isolation. But 2020 is not the Year of the Pandemic; it is still the Year of Our Lord.

Our bishop, His Eminence Archbishop Irénée of Ottawa and the Archdiocese of Canada, has just written the following to all his clergy:

“God is giving us a crash course on prayer... Is our faith only centered on Sunday Liturgies? Or are we centered on prayer? Sunday morning Liturgies should be the climax of our prayer life, which is our intimate relationship with Our Lord. Praying at home is essential for all of us. Now we have to realize this and fall back on it. Praying at home, morning and evening prayers as a family is essential...”

Even while some clergy will have to self-isolate in the coming weeks, remember also that when Mary of Egypt received her communion from the priest-monk Zosimas, it was her viaticum — the holy sacrament received as her last act before her death. The church will not leave her children pastorless, so if there is great need for you to have the sacrament, call on your priest. Under obedience to his bishop he will either be able to attend you or help find another priest who can.

As most church gatherings larger than a very small number are being banned temporarily by civil authorities, the hierarchs and pastors of various dioceses and jurisdiction are responding with obedience and wisdom for the good of their flocks. We have not “forsaken the assembling of ourselves together” which Scripture (Hebrews 10) warns us against; rather, God has sent a time of Lenten isolation to us. We will not be so alone as the monks of St. Zosima’s brotherhood, as we can use 2020 tools like e-mail, streaming, texting, websites and more to help our fellow parishioners, as well as fellow Orthodox beyond our own parishes, to know that we are ‘alone together’.

Indeed, this global pandemic may perhaps bring us new opportunities for evangelism. Keep calm, carry on, and see what God will do as we begin our Lenten isolation, praying ‘alone together.’ ❖



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