

TO: ARCHDIOCESE OF PGH AND W PA (OCA) CLERGY / LAITY
FROM: ARCHPRIEST WILLIAM J. EVANSKY, CHANCELLOR

CHRIST IS RISEN!

Attached for your review and dissemination locally are two documents released last Friday (5/1/20) by the Holy Synod of the OCA. The “Synodal Directives” is a rather in-depth document containing much important information concerning precautions the Holy Church should implement to keep our clergy and laity as safe as possible from COVID-19 while we begin to methodically re-open our churches. An important statement in that document recognizes that it is the ultimate responsibility of the local hierarch, in collaboration with his Chancellor, Deans, clergy, diocesan medical professionals, etc., to determine at what stages parishes are currently, and under which conditions they may move to the next stage. This statement is an attempt to least partially (and hopefully with at least some clarity!) explain our local diocesan situation. Please note that this communication does NOT abrogate any parish’s responsibility to diligently maintain the requirements already well known (i.e. masks [if required - but not for the clergy serving or the singers], church cleaning requirements, special methodologies for administering the Holy Mysteries, warnings to vulnerable populations to carefully personally weigh the prudence of church attendance, etc.)

We find ourselves operating within the boundaries of our Archdiocese under different governmental directives: 1) the State of Ohio, 2) the State of West Virginia, and two variations among our Pennsylvania parishes - 3) “red” and 4) “yellow” response levels. Therefore, His Eminence directs that all parishes must abide by the local governmental decisions pertinent to their location.

Specifically, PA diocesan parishes located in the portions of the Commonwealth in “red” are to continue their operations according to his previous directives until such a time as the status is changed to “yellow.” You can expect another email directive when that occurs specifically implementing that change within the diocese. The Dean of the Southwest Deanery is monitoring the situations in Ohio and WV and is keeping the chancery updated concerning those unique scenarios.

For PA diocesan parishes moving on May 8 to “yellow:”

- a. Mindful of variations that may be necessary in the local setting, a return to a more “robust” liturgical schedule is permitted (i.e. Vespers, Holy day services, etc.)

- b. Each parish priest is authorized to make those decisions in consultation with his laity leaders - and his Dean (or Associate Dean) if questions arise.
- c. That expanded schedule of services must, however, include a limitation on the number of people present - - a minimum distance of 6-8 feet must be maintained by attendees;
 - i. the number of attendees will, therefore, vary from parish-to-parish depending on safe physical configuration.
 - ii. Family units that have been together “under one roof” since the beginning of this “stay-at-home” situation may stand closer together, however.
- d. Each parish should construct a plan to make sure all parish members wishing to attend services have an equal opportunity to do so in an orderly manner.
- e. Non-liturgical in-person parish events (i.e. coffee hours/ dinners/ Bible study groups/ church school/ meetings/ etc.) should wait until the COVID-19 restrictions are further lifted in the future. Of course, on-line options are still encouraged when feasible to continue the life of the parish.
- f. Priests are asked, when possible to do so safely, to meet the spiritual needs of the faithful choosing not to return to church for the time-being because of COVID-19.
- g. Private Confessions can resume - IF they can be done by perhaps erecting some kind of physical barrier between the priest and penitent or by carefully maintaining the 6-8 ft. “zone.” Phone confessions are still permitted if needed as well.
- h. Some “resourcefulness” will be needed pertaining the singing since the usual choir setting should not be attempted at this time; perhaps just a single cantor may be necessary. It has also been suggested that the minimum number of singers be used while standing near the front of the church and maintaining safe distance between the singers.
- i. The blessing of cemetery graves traditionally done during the Paschal season can proceed IF proper social distancing is done even though in an outdoor setting.
 - i. This is important to remember in those parishes that have a tradition of beginning with a “general Panikhida” before doing the blessing of individual graves afterward.
 - ii. Parishes still in the “stay-at-home” restriction are strongly urged to delay large gatherings at cemeteries until the order is lifted - even if it means a “Pentecost season” blessing.
- j. Priests should work with their parish leaders to institute proper health safety practices for service attendees - - please review the suggestions in the synod document. This could include discussions such as: 1) one person

opening-closing the exterior door 2) one officer lighting candles instead of each person doing it 3) collection method 4) etc.

These points listed above are not meant to be a complete list of considerations. Please email me at this email address or call my Ambridge parish office (724-266-5009) if you have specific questions not covered here or cannot be logically deduced from the Holy Synod's document.

A final point of clarification concerning a point made in the "Synod Directives" - His Eminences trusts that his local priests are well-versed concerning the situations among his parish members. Therefore, each parish priest is authorized to decide whether or not to exclude a parish medical professional or "essential" worker from attendance due to possible direct COVID-19 contact at their job. Any parish priest needing guidance about a specific situation should contact the archbishop privately (or the chancellor if the hierarch is unavailable when you make the inquiry so the request can be relayed).

Finally, continued fervent prayer for the alleviation of this pandemic is still needed by the clergy and the faithful - His Eminence requests that you please continue daily in private prayer, as well as in your corporate worship, to beseech the Lord to hear our prayers speedily and have mercy. May the blessing of the Lord be upon you!

Thank you.

Fr. Bill