

Our U.S. Archdiocese during the Time of Pandemic

A short reflection as an introduction to the report of HE Metropolitan Nicolae
at the Virtual Congress on September 4-5, 2020

At the beginning of March 2020, the world as we know it came under the grip of a terrible virus, a pandemic that has caused multiple changes in our daily life, including our religious life. We have often heard that “the world will not be the same anymore,” words emanating from a fear of sickness and death, a fear that is magnified by the many scenarios about how the world will be “after CoVid19.”

It is true that the world has changed in many ways: isolation and distancing, the result of public health regulations, have become mankind’s codes during the pandemic. Schools and many other types of activities have moved exclusively online, and even religious services were, for a while, restricted only to virtual participation. What used to be promulgated by *science fiction* books became our everyday reality, forcing us to ask important questions about our future and the future of the world. Had we been asked before the pandemic how it would be to work and learn “from home,” with goods being delivered to our door, we would have probably answered positively, accepting this scenario because of the comfort such a life implies. But when we actually experienced this, we discovered it impossible to accept such a life lived in isolation, fear, and uncertainty.

Some of us have tried to ignore this new reality, while others have seen it as a sign of the end of the world. All of us who call ourselves Christians have discovered that our survival is closely tied to a spiritual life which now, in isolation, we can practice without invoking “earthly cares” as an excuse. Isolation has impelled us towards more personal and family prayer. Even if we could not participate in person at church services, we have been able to use the technology of the internet, and even more, we’ve had the chance to organize a spiritual life in our private “prayer closet.” And this has become an opportunity to reflect on ourselves, to look differently at our neighbor, to ask ourselves meaningful questions about things of value in our lives. Our Lord’s question: “*For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*” (Matt 16:26) has had a special resonance in the minds of every Christian during these times of the pandemic.

It has also been a chance for us to watch *nature* as it has continued its life without isolation, fear, or uncertainty. Let us remember the words of Christ: “*Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*” (Matt 6:26). And from this general question about faith in the Providence of God, we’ve begun to ask ourselves what is each one’s response, on a personal, family and community level.

After consultations with our priests via Zoom (we have adapted quickly), we decided what needed to be done in our parishes: to follow the rules/recommendations of the state governors, to increase our service schedule in order to offer to the faithful a more intense connection with the liturgical life, to develop our program of biblical and catechetical studies (*The Way* program already presented). During Great Lent we were allowed to have fewer people present at services (according to the regulations) but increased net attendance by having more services during the week. To the personal prayer rule we sought to add this virtual liturgical program, and to keep in constant contact with the faithful by phone, email, etc. We tried to encourage everyone and call them to prayer, faith, and hope. We sought out those who were infected and helped them in any way we could. **We endeavored to express the Christian’s understanding of being an example of a balanced attitude that comes from hope in God’s providence in these times of fear and concern about the future.**

We celebrated Pascha and many of our patronal feasts in isolation, with the faithful participating only online but with *living hope*, as I said in my Pastoral Letter for the Lord’s Resurrection, “*for Christ*

the Lord has conquered death and granted Resurrection to us. The One Who left the empty tomb and entered through locked doors now comes to every home and family and cannot be stopped by the isolation in which we now find ourselves. The One who conquered death now overcomes every restriction and comes down to bring peace in all our souls.” And our hope and faith in God’s care for us was rewarded because at the end of May many of the restrictions began to relax. But the pandemic is not over yet.

During this time, we have discovered the strong faith of many of the faithful, but also the deep fear of sickness and death in others. We have seen all kinds of reactions among the hierarchs, priests and faithful, when faced with this pandemic. The most striking example is that of Holy Communion, from the question of whether we should participate at the Divine Liturgy and receive Holy Communion, to the passionate discussion, which has become Pan-Orthodox, about the mode in which we should offer it. The Communion Spoon has become a subject of controversy and of accusations against the clergy. Although on a Pan-Orthodox level there has been only one answer—that we maintain the traditional mode of partaking with only one spoon, in the U.S. there have been a great variety of ways of accommodating Communion during the pandemic among the several jurisdictions and even within each jurisdiction. *A test and an important question for the future!!!*

Meanwhile, the persecution of Christians in Asia and Africa has continued even during the pandemic. According to the *Open Doors* organization, 2983 Christians were killed in 2019 for reasons related to their Christian faith, 1200 in Nigeria alone between January and June 2020, and 9488 churches were attacked. Isolation and fear have exacerbated racial frustrations, leading to unimaginable violence, outbreaks, and conflicts on multiple levels in the USA.

We can say that the world has changed during the pandemic. But how have we, who call ourselves Orthodox Christians, changed? The world has always been troubled by pandemics and catastrophes. The Flood in Noah’s time cleansed the world of sin and offered the opportunity for the birth of a new world. Noah built the Ark and saved a part of the world from the Flood. For us to pass through the “flood” of the new world, we have to take care to build “houses of virtue” in our souls (Abba Dorotheos), to “*hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering*” (Heb 10:23), knowing “*that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*” (Rom 8:28). In God’s pedagogy, this trial, this test of maturity for today’s humanity, can be an opportunity for a deep searching of our conscience and of spiritual renewal in our time, exhausted by consumerism, selfish interests, and conflict. St. Paul wrote to the Christians of Rome, already persecuted by the Roman emperors: “*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*” (Rom 8:35). If until now we have avoided the answer to this question, the time has come for us to forsake the three giants that precede sin: *ignorance, forgetfulness and inactivity* (St. Mark the Ascetic). And we hope to hear these words from the Apocalypse: “*Because you have kept My command to persevere, I also will keep you from the hour of trial which shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth*” (3:10).

† Metropolitan Nicolae