March 31, 2020

Dear Faithful of the Diocese of the South,

May God bless you!

As we approach Holy Week and Pascha Archbishop Alexander has issued clear directives for our clergy and faithful. Attendance at services will be limited only to those singers, servers, and clergy necessary to assure that the services are conducted in a faithful manner. This is an unfortunate fact of the current circumstances that our country faces. In certain civil jurisdictions parishes and missions have already been asked to remain closed by local ordinance. Some of us are more fortunate than the rest of the country in that at present local law does not prohibit the celebration of the Church services for online streaming.

I ask that you be patient and understanding during this present time so that we neither jeopardize the health of our fellow parishioners and neighbors, nor provoke more stringent implementation of existing "stay at home" orders that might leave the altars of our churches bereft of worship entirely.

In the Second Book of Chronicles we read how Hezekiah, King of Israel, following a time of sacrilege, ordered the date of the celebration of Pascha for that year to be changed! The Chronicler tells us:

“Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep the Passover to the Lord God of Israel. For the king and his leaders and all the assembly in Jerusalem had agreed to keep the Passover in the second month. For they could not keep it at the regular time, because a sufficient number of priests had not consecrated themselves, nor had the people gathered together at Jerusalem. And the matter pleased the king and all the assembly. So they resolved to make a proclamation throughout all Israel, from Beersheba to Dan, that they should come to keep the Passover to the Lord God of Israel at Jerusalem, since they had not done it for a long time in the prescribed manner” (2 Chron 30. 1-5).

King Hezekiah made this decision based on a provision in the Law of Moses, as recorded in the Book of Numbers, stipulating that the Passover may be kept in extraordinary circumstances on the fourteenth day of the second month instead of the first month. No one has any intention of tampering with the date of the celebration of Pascha, but we make this observation so that you know that even the Law of Moses makes provision for cases in which the celebration of Pascha is interrupted.

Brothers and sisters, for many of us this is a time of extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented, difficulty socially, economically, physically, and spiritually. Our liturgical life has been temporarily upended, not only in terms of the Lenten and Paschal services, but also with respect to the "special" services - baptisms, chrismations, weddings, etc., which are now postponed to around the time of Pentecost. This is a grief to us all. Yet the demands of the
Gospel upon us have not changed. Christ calls us to watch and pray, anticipating his coming again, and, most especially, to love one another.

While we must keep at a physical distance for the time being, we must not give in to despair and abandon the struggle for the salvation of our soul. This does not mean we should not experience disappointment or sorrow at the prospect of having an experience of Holy Week and Pascha that is typically reserved for prisoners and shut ins. But we ought not to allow sadness or irritation to overwhelm us and darken the light that God has planted in us, and renewed time and again through the holy mysteries. We are not abandoned, either by God or the Church. We suffer together in common trouble and we labor in prayer together in common hope, trusting the promise of Christ that if we are faithful to the end we will be saved (Mt. 24:13).

I ask your prayers.

In Christ,

Archimandrite Gerasim
Administrator of the Diocese of the South
Dean of St Seraphim Cathedral

p.s. Attached you will find a link to an explanation from a doctor on the front lines in New York City, explaining in simple terms good steps to take in order to keep you and your family healthy. You may access it here.