

Guidelines for Opening Parish Churches and Resumption of Public Services on Sundays, Holy Days of Obligation and Weekdays

Dear Reverend Fathers and Deacons: Christ is Risen!

Firstly, I would like to sincerely thank you - the priests and deacons of the Eparchy for your outstanding pastoral service to your faithful during this difficult time. You have demonstrated your love for the Church and for your people by providing them with liturgical services by means of social media and by your unfailing personal contact with them via telephone and other means.

Our parish churches have now been closed for public services for two months. The time is approaching when we will be able to resume services for our faithful, although with certain limitations.

You may have heard that certain counties in northern Pennsylvania are allowing churches to re-open this week. As of today I am unaware of any such permission being granted for churches in New York State and New England. But we must be prepared for this eventuality. I suspect that our parishes located in rural areas or smaller towns will be allowed re-open sooner than those located in larger urban centers. I ask that you inform the Eparchial Office when the civil authorities in your location allow public services in churches to resume.

We are all anxious to invite our faithful back to church and they are just as anxious to return. But because the danger of infection still exists, certain safety measures must be followed. The spiritual welfare of the clergy and faithful and the maintenance of public health safety standards are of paramount concern to us. Please make use of the following practical guidelines as an aid in re-opening your churches:

Guidelines for Opening Parish Churches and Resuming Public Services

1. The church should be cleaned/sanitized before each service when the public may be present, especially those areas and surfaces that are commonly used and touched (bathrooms, railings, doors, pew backs, etc)
2. Social distancing must be observed by laity. Please consider 1/3 of total church capacity as the maximum number of persons that may be present at any given Divine Liturgy or other service. Be aware that in your area the civic authorities may limit the number of attendees to a specific number.
3. Prayer books and liturgy books are to be removed from the pews. The faithful may bring their own personal prayer books from home.
4. Social distancing of 6 feet (2 metres) must be maintained: a) between non-family members while in the pews; b) while standing or moving in the aisles.
5. Wearing face masks is strongly recommended for the laity. Priests are obliged to wear masks while preparing the holy gifts on the Preparation table and while distributing Holy Communion.

6. Veneration of icons and crosses by should be done without touching or kissing them.
7. The faithful are not to attend church services if they are feeling ill. They should not greet one another with handshakes and should leave the church immediately following the completion of the service.
8. Please remind the faithful that because of the ongoing public health crisis, they are not bound by the Sunday obligation to attend church services. Dispensation from Sunday Liturgy obligation remains valid until further notice.
9. When distributing Holy Communion with a golden spoon please instruct those who choose to receive to open their mouths wide, not to touch the spoon, and not to cough or sneeze upon it. The spoon must be sanitized immediately after each communicant by wiping it with a cloth soaked in pure alcohol. A disposable wooden spoon may also be used for distributing Holy Communion. A separate wooden spoon is to be used for each communicant. They should be disposed of following the service by burning. Please remind the faithful that they should not feel obliged to come forward for Holy Communion if they are uneasy about receiving.
10. Celebrations of weddings, baptism and funerals are allowed if all the precautions listed above are observed.
11. Collections baskets are to be left in designated places where parishioners may leave their offerings.
12. Live-streaming of liturgical services should continue for the time being as many faithful might be uneasy in attending personally.
13. Please consider other precautionary measures to help ensure that our churches are safe and everyone's good health is maintained.

Hopefully, these guidelines will help you in resuming liturgical life in our parishes. Please take the opportunity to thank our wonderful faithful for their constant dedication to God, their service to those in need, and their continued material support of our Eparchy and parishes.

Sincerely in the Risen Christ,

Most Rev. Paul Chomnycky, OSBM
Bishop of Stamford