



Orthodox Church in America
DIOCESE OF THE MIDWEST

19 August 2021

Martyr Andrew the General and those with him

№. 113

To the Clergy, Laity and Monastics of the Diocese of the Midwest,

I find it necessary once again to write to you about the matter of COVID and the issue of masking and vaccinations in our parishes. As we all know, this has been and continues to be an extremely divisive issue.

Although this is a divisive topic, I do believe that clergy and lay leaders have been mindful of your parish in the decisions you have made thus far. Some have chosen stricter observations of masking, while others have not. Regardless of the approach, I trust it has always been done in love. In this great responsibility of leadership that you have all been called to, it shows the diversity of each community, that in general needs to be addressed specifically.

This being so, I have decided that I will not be issuing any formal Diocese-wide directives about masking *at this time*. These decisions about masking need to be made on the local parish level. Clergy need to be well-informed about what decisions your local county health department is issuing regarding COVID and its variants. Serious consideration needs to be given if the local health department issues a mask mandate, especially if the local county stats on COVID support that decision. In other words, if your health department issues a mandate, a local parish should abide by that mandate.

My decision on not mandating masking is not because of my lack of concern about the dangers of this continuing COVID pandemic, but that the pandemic has come to be—at this point in time—something too complex for a Diocese-wide mandate. This issue is complex first of all because the coronavirus, especially the Delta variant, spreads quickly and is a moving target of sorts. New strains are popping up, and many of these new strains have different effects upon differing populations (young, old, etc.), and now there is the appearance of the Lambda variant. Plus, now we know some people who have been fully vaccinated can still transmit the virus to others, and some have been getting COVID after being vaccinated.

This is complex, as well, because of local factors, variables, and determinants. Some counties in the Diocese have much higher positivity rates along with much lower inoculation rates. These two things put together constitute an especially dangerous state of affairs for those in our parishes. In a situation such as this, it may be wise for the rectors and parish councils to make such a decision themselves on mask mandates and social distancing. This being so, there are other counties in the Midwest that have lower positivity rates and higher inoculation rates, the result being that parishes may deem it best to continue with the practice of voluntary masking.

In the matter of vaccinations, I myself have been fully vaccinated. I want to encourage those who have not been vaccinated to speak with your doctors and discuss this matter. Follow your doctor's direction. My personal belief is that people need to be vaccinated, but I don't think, as your Diocesan Hierarchy, the answer is for me to mandate vaccinations. I understand a third booster shot will be made available to people who have been fully vaccinated with the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. This is after 8 months since they have received their second shot. Once again, I plan to get that booster. I hope the Food and Drug Administration will approve the vaccines soon as a normative inoculation (not just on an emergency basis), as that might help people who haven't been vaccinated to do so.

No matter what the local situation may be, the most important thing is to use good discretion. Priests and parishes should **not** be making these decisions based on political (conservative vs. liberal) motives, but through the genuine wisdom and counsel of the Holy Spirit Who guides us into all truth. In light of the above words concerning local health departments, we also have the apostolic exhortation of Saint Paul, who writes in his letter to the Romans:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment” (Romans 13:1-2).

If you have any questions, please feel free to share your feedback via your parish priest, and he can share that with me. Once again, please remember that, as Saint Paisios of Mount Athos says, all that we do in our Church must be done for two reasons: for the love of God and the good of our neighbor.

With love and prayer for all of you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Paul". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

+PAUL
Archbishop of Chicago and the Midwest

Cc.: His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon

TO BE READ OR CIRCULATED IN ALL PARISHES