



The Diocese of the West
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
Most Rev. Archbishop BENJAMIN of
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May 14, 2021

To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful of the Diocese of the West

Christ is risen!

It has been well over a year since we first became aware of the COVID-19 pandemic and the negative impact it was beginning to have on society as well as in our personal lives. Early in the pandemic, governments and governmental agencies began to implement guidelines, procedures, and protocols to protect the public health. The Church also participated in the effort to minimize the effects of the pandemic, including introducing some temporary procedures that affected our common life and worship. These protocols included the use of masks, social distancing, suspending of social gatherings, etc. The past months have been strange and even difficult for us all as we have navigated these unknown and sometimes frightening waters. And, without a doubt, our patience has been tried on many occasions. However, we held fast to our conviction that the Lord was leading us through something from which we could all learn to grow in faith and in trust of His mercy.

As you may have heard, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has updated its recommended protocols concerning the use of masks. Essentially, masks are no longer mandated for those persons who **have been fully vaccinated**. This means that those who have received their final covid vaccination (one or two, depending on the vaccine) no longer need to wear masks indoors or outdoors, in large or small groups or gatherings, and without concern for social distancing. This would seem to include gatherings in church. However, if those who are fully vaccinated wish, they might also consider continuing to wear masks for their own comfort and out of respect for others. The CDC also recommended and advised that **those who are not fully vaccinated**

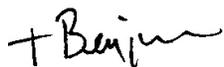
continue to wear masks for the time being in order to protect themselves and others from potential exposure.

Please refer to your state and local government regulations with regard to the implementation of these new protocols. In California, for example, it is my understanding the rules regarding the wearing of masks indoors remain in effect until June 15 in spite of the CDC recommendations. This is, however, not the case in other states in our diocese.

I bless our parishes to implement the new CDC guidelines as outlined above, noting that these guidelines clearly recommend that those who have not been vaccinated continue to wear masks indoors. However, I also note that there are some grey areas within the CDC guidelines that raise concern. One of these is that there is no realistic way to monitor this new provision, i.e. to determine who has or hasn't yet been vaccinated. Indeed, this is a matter of personal concern which many would not want to share. In the parish context, this puts our clergy in the unenviable and unfeasible position of monitoring something which is impossible to monitor. Because of this, I ask that individual parishioners and families, whether wearing masks or not, monitor themselves in this regard, always in a manner that is respectful of others in the parish community.

As we begin to see an end to the pandemic and a return to a more normal way of life, I ask that all our clergy, monastics, and faithful continue to live in the spirit of mutual love, support, and cooperation and with the fidelity to Christ that you have all exhibited throughout these many months.

Yours in the Risen Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Benjamin".

+BENJAMIN

Archbishop of San Francisco and the West