



The Diocese of the West
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
Most Rev. Archbishop BENJAMIN of
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To the Very Reverend and Reverend Clergy, Monastics, and Faithful of the
Diocese of the West:

Recent days have brought promising news concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects it has on society. There seems to be a hope that all Americans can be vaccinated within the next few months. Numbers of reported cases are on the decline and the death rate has shown a significant decrease as well. However, we must remain cautious as we move forward. Until we are “back to normal,” the protocol and procedures which I have blessed for the Diocese of the West (masks, social distancing, the use of hand sanitizer, etc.) remain in force, with some adaptations and the lifting of some restrictions as noted below.

In a little over a week, we will enter the period of Great Lent, a time of renewal and restoration. In preparation for the spiritual journey that lies ahead of us, the Holy Synod issued a statement on March 3, 2021 which addresses the changes that we hope to see. The following excerpt is particularly relevant in providing direction at the present time:

“The substance of the May 1, 2020 Synodal Directives remain in place and their implementation is overseen by the Diocesan Bishop who is entrusted with the spiritual and pastoral care of the clergy, faithful, and monastics, protecting their wellbeing as he determines necessary, while always remaining of one mind with the Holy Synod.

We must continue to adhere to the civil guidelines, beginning with those of our federal governments and then the particular and localized guidelines from the civil authorities, recognizing that there is a diversity from state to state, province to province, county to county, and even municipality to municipality. Civil authorities have largely been reluctant to impose restrictions on the churches, but our communities are expected to respond in a way that is consonant with the public

welfare. The Holy Synod, concerned for the health and well-being of all, intends to follow in the spirit in which those guidelines are given.”

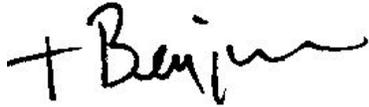
As we enter Great Lent, a grace-filled time of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and spiritual renewal, I am grateful to announce the following changes that are blessed for implementation in the Diocese of the West:

- Icons may be venerated in the customary manner; the people should be advised to be attentive to their own health when doing so, e.g. people with coughs or colds should refrain from kissing the icons as they would refrain from doing at the time of any illness.
- Coffee/fellowship hours may be held, provided they take place outdoors, and that the other usual procedures are maintained, e.g., social distancing is observed.
- I reiterate that the use of one Communion spoon has already been blessed. Those whose communities have been using multiple spoons are blessed to continue this practice until further notice.
- Collection baskets may be passed.
- Service materials, e.g. service and prayer books, may now be placed for the use of the faithful, provided they are regularly sanitized.
- Forgiveness Vespers should be served as usual, while observing all current safety protocols, but without the direct personal exchange of the kiss of peace. The priest will ask forgiveness of the congregation from the amvon. The faithful will respond from their places.
- Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers should be served in each parish separately, either directly after the Divine Liturgy or on Sunday evening, while observing all current safety protocols.
- The Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts should be served as usual, while observing all current health protocols.

Further specifics relating to the Divine Services of Holy Week and Pascha will be forthcoming. I invite the clergy to provide suggestions about how we might observe Holy Week in the fullest manner possible while still being cautious and concerned for the health of all.

It is my hope that these changes in our diocesan protocols and procedures will herald the restoration of all our customary liturgical and parish practices. May the Lord grant it soon! With my brother hierarchs of the Holy Synod, I encourage you to avail yourselves of the spiritual richness of the Church's Lenten Services as

often as possible. I ask everyone to do so in all care and safety and to remain vigilant in caring for one another. As we journey through Great Lent, we walk with Christ to Golgotha and on to the empty tomb. May we all look forward to celebrating the third-day resurrection in faith and hope, and with love for one another.

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol followed by the name "Benjamin" in a cursive script.

+BENJAMIN
Archbishop of San Francisco and the Diocese of the West