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## From Pascha to Pentecost – What Next for Liturgies?

Dear Faithful and Friends of Saint John's,

Christ is Risen! Indeed, He is Risen!

First, I want to thank all the clergy and the chanters and choir singers for the beautiful Holy Week services we shared last week. In spite of the circumstances of this unique time, everything seemed to go very well. I know many enjoyed the Agape Vespers on Sunday and the opportunity to visit together outside and share a meal. As we move through this season of Pascha and towards the celebration of Pentecost on June 20, we can take one more step towards our normal gathering as a community.

In Friday's Anchorage Daily News, Megan Clancy, the Medical Director of Infection Control at Providence Hospital in Anchorage, wrote about the end of this pandemic, "*We are close, but we are not there yet.*" I think this is a fair statement most can agree with. So as much as we might wish, we cannot simply throw caution to the wind and gather with no considerations for the pandemic. Here, then, is how I propose we will take another step forward and still be safe and sensible.

### One Sunday Service, Two Groups

We will have only one Sunday service each week. Two groups will be assigned to have a place in the Nave and Narthex on one Sunday, and the other two will be assigned to the Nave and Narthex on the following Sunday. Those not assigned can still participate by coming to the Cathedral and standing in the basement to watch the service on-screen, and then come upstairs when it is time to receive Communion. This means every family can go to liturgy every Sunday, if they want to: one Sunday upstairs, one Sunday downstairs. I heard from several who participated in Liturgy downstairs during Holy Week that the experience was good, much better than they thought it might be. Since we have only two Sundays left until School is out, we will soon be able to leave the basement set up just for this purpose. For this coming Sunday, the groups upstairs will be Olivet/Sinai. The next Sunday, May 16, will be for Tabor/Zion. After this, these groupings will alternate. A schedule will be posted on our website as usual.

### Important Things to Note

- Matins will begin at 9am, but we will make some adjustments so that Matins lasts only one hour and the Divine Liturgy can start right at 10am. So please aim to arrive at the beginning of Liturgy to hear the priest announce, "*Blessed is the Kingdom....*"
- The capacity of the Nave will be limited to the number of chairs in the Nave. So please stand only where there are chairs, and be sensitive to other people who might want to observe the familiar social-distancing. In other words, ask before sitting right next to someone. The chairs will remain in the arrangement they were for Holy Week. Overflow for the assigned groups will be into the Narthex and then into the basement if necessary.

- Masks are still required in the Cathedral, upstairs and down. This is still mandated by the Anchorage Municipality, and it is also an important level of precaution for us at this time. From all that we have learned about Covid over the last year, participating in a Church service, standing close to other people for an extended time, and singing is one of the settings most susceptible to spreading a respiratory virus. Good air circulation is helpful, and we have a system that circulates our inside air well. Just three days ago I learned that after Holy Week all the monks in one Orthodox monastery in the United States got Covid and some are hospitalized. So it also should be re-stated that if you are sick, please stay home.
- Now that spring weather is here, we will set up a place outside under a canopy for coffee and snacks to be available after Liturgy. For now we will purchase simple, pre-packaged snacks. Coffee set-up and clean-up will be organized soon, so please be ready to help.
- Livestreaming Sunday morning services will continue for the summer.

### **How Long Will We Do This?**

Honestly, one thing we will observe over the next period of time is if our increased gathering for services results in any virus-spreading event. Hopefully it will not, but the real possibility is still there. At this point Covid infections in Anchorage are trending down. This is largely due to the number of vaccinated people. In our parish about 60% of our adult members have been vaccinated. It would certainly increase our confidence to re-gather fully, if that number were higher, up to 70% percent or even more. Remember, a large part of our parish cannot get vaccinated, our children; and while the spread of Covid among children is much less, it does happen, and it is possible that new variants could make children more susceptible. There are parents who worry about this.

If any of this proposed above doesn't work, we will adjust. And if anything significantly changes with the spread of Covid in our larger community, we will also adjust to that as needed. Bearing all this in mind, let us continue to pray that God will lead us and take care of us; and let us continue to be kind and respectful to one another in our differences.

With gratitude for you all and all that you do,

Fr. Marc

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