



Melkite Catholic Eparchy of Australia and New Zealand

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The Most Reverend
ROBERT RABBAT
by the Mercy of God

Melkite Greek-Catholic Eparchy of Australia and New Zealand
to the Priests and Deacons, my Fellow Ministers at the Altar,
to the Religious and to All the Faithful of our Holy Eparchy,

a Pastoral Message concerning the Present COVID 19 Pandemic.

"Today is the beginning of our salvation and the revelation of the Mystery that was planned from all eternity. The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel announces this grace. Let us join him in crying out to the Mother of God: 'Hail, O Full of Grace, the Lord is with you!' "
(Troparion of the Annunciation)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Peace be with you.

For the past two weeks, I have been in regular contact with the parish priests, who have kindly been sharing directly with you my pastoral directives. Of course, our discussions have been concerned very much with the present Corona virus pandemic, the implications for our Eparchy and our Melkite Community, as well as your own physical and spiritual wellbeing.

After prayerful consideration and the latest Federal and local Government instructions, I would now like to share with you some thoughts that have emerged from our consultations.

There can be no denial that we are living in dangerous and challenging times. Whether or not these days prove to be the most difficult for a century, we cannot know until we have passed through them. However, pass through them we will, and we will do so with the help of God's grace and his loving kindness.

The most pressing development, of course, has been the shut-down of many services and venues, including churches. Lest anyone say anything other than to express our natural regret at this necessity, it must be affirmed that our governments - Federal and State - have the right, indeed the duty, to take any and all legitimate precautions to protect and promote the health and safety of the Community.

For our part, the Church has an obligation to comply with the legitimate directives issued by the civil authorities. As St Paul writes to the Romans, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.” (Rom 13:1)

We are all called to be very cautious and wise when using the Sacred Scripture to quote out of context the words of our Lord, such as: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” (Mk 12:17) or “They will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all.” (Mk 16:18)

All Melkite churches in Australia and New Zealand are now closed. This will remain the situation until further notice from the Eparchy.

Perhaps there will be those who will find absence from the Holy Liturgy, especially on Sundays, a very great burden. However, we are not held accountable for that over which we have control. I would urge all our Clergy and Faithful to offer our sorrow at this temporary hardship to the Good Lord, the One who reads our hearts, who knows our distress and who understands us better than we understand ourselves.

- This church “shut-down” is not peculiar to our Melkite Eparchy in Australia and New Zealand, but has occurred already in the United States, Canada, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan and the Holy Land.
- Even without access to a church building, our life of prayer and worship can continue and must be cultivated.

Whenever possible the Holy Liturgy and the occasional services, such as the Akathistos and Paraklesis, will be live-streamed. I would encourage you to visit the appropriate sites and to follow the Holy Services. However, try to maintain a reverent environment in which to watch. It is not a secular movie to be viewed with coffee, cake and conversation.

If you do not have a designated place for prayer in your home, prepare one now. Set aside a place, usually a corner, and place there a cross as well as icons of our Lord and our Blessed Lady, the Theotokos. Also include a copy of the Bible, especially the four Gospels and the New Testament. Each day, most probably in the morning, right before breakfast, or in the evening, perhaps before dinner, let the family gather here to pray together.

Each day during this Great and Holy Lent, I would urge you all to read the Akathistos prayers for the Friday of each week. Many will undoubtedly find courage and solace in drawing close to our Blessed Mother in the recitation of the Rosary. The liturgical calendar of our Eparchy gives the Scripture readings for each day; note them, take your bibles and read them.

- If a sick or elderly person in your family or household requires Anointing and/or Holy Communion contact your parish priest. However, any visit must be a private sick call, and not a public gathering.
- Let us be examples of Christian charity. Show love and regard for all our fellow Australians and New Zealanders; and let it be not only for those who share a common Faith with us, but include every one of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. Try to arrange with neighbours to keep an eye on the elderly, the sick, and those with special-needs person in your street. There are undoubtedly many simple tasks to be done that can make an old or challenged person's situation seem less burdensome. Just make sure that they, who may be in need of help, know that you and others are there.
- As Christians, we should avoid the unfortunate practice of "panic buying" or hoarding of goods. Remember, hoarding is a form of looting and looting is stealing. The person who can afford "to buy up big" is stealing from those who can only buy in small amounts as their limited budgets permit.

St Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) wrote "You must pray as if everything depends on God, and you must work as if everything depends on you." We must storm the Gates of Heaven with our prayers, but we must observe meticulously all that is necessary to halt the advance of Covid19. We must be honest and not delude ourselves. Whatever is asked of us, we must do, and not simply *think* we are doing the right thing.

- I cannot advise too strongly that we maintain a prudent and informed discretion concerning the present pandemic. Idle gossip, uninformed opinion and false information can only cause further problems for individuals and communities. We must be prudent and discerning in our use of so-called social media, which unfortunately has become the source of much which is dangerous, and potentially lethal. At a time like this, the medical advice we do not need is that of amateurs.

Throughout the Sacred Scriptures, perhaps the most beautiful greeting is "Peace be with you" - indeed, throughout our Middle Eastern Communities, it is still a standard salutation. In the Gospel of St Luke, it is this greeting which constitutes the first words of the Annunciation; the Angel says to our Lady, "Peace be with you" and he tells her "do not be afraid." (Lk 1:28, 30)

Today is the Feast of the Annunciation, and as we rejoice in the Dawn of our Salvation there could be no greater mercy to ask of God than peace and freedom from fear. Now is the time to heed the words of our Lord, Jesus Christ, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, trust in me." (Jn 14:1)

As we commend all to the Merciful Lord, we should remember not simply our own wellbeing, but that of all people in all places, who face this crisis with us.

- Especially let us keep in fervent prayer those bio-scientists who are seeking a vaccine. Through prayer each one of us can support their efforts.
- In our prayers, we should be ever mindful of doctors, nurses and healthcare workers throughout the world who, often with little regard for themselves, continue to minister to the sick. In other places, some have succumbed to the virus and have died. Let us pray for their repose, and may their memory be eternal.
- We must offer constant and sincere prayers for our civil authorities and religious leaders that their decisions for the wellbeing of their communities will be made with every grace and help from Above.

May the Blessed Theotokos, under her title “She Who is Quick to Hear,” hasten to our aid and speedily deliver us from this affliction.

St Luke and All Holy Physician Saints, pray for us.

St Damien of Molokai, pray for us.

I wish you all a safe and blessed Feast of the Annunciation.

I will continue to be in regular contact with you.

With prayers assured and with my paternal blessing.



✠ Robert Rabbat, DD
Eparch



From our Eparchy at Greenacre, New South Wales

The Annunciation to the Most Holy Theotokos,
25 March 2020