



ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ ΓΗΝΙΩΝ ΟΡΘΟΔΟΞΩΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΩΝ ΕΛΛΑΔΟΣ
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THE MOST REVEREND AUXENTIOS
RULING BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE

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Holy Apostle Jason and Sosipater of the Seventy

COVID-19 and Information Wars

*An encyclical to the clergy and faithful of
the Diocese of Etna and Portland*

Dear Clergy and Faithful:

Christ is Risen! Χριστός Ἀνέστη!

Many of you, clergy and laity alike, have sent me links, articles, questions, or statements of concern about the COVID-19 virus and related issues, asking my opinion or guidance. What follows is my best attempt to summarize these concerns and provide some helpful suggestions, if not a few spiritual imperatives.

The Threat:

- Our present crisis is significant, multi-leveled, and unprecedented.
- COVID-19 appeared as a highly contagious pathogen and initial data suggested we might suffer a million or more fatalities, a significant fraction being untreated on account of an ill-prepared medical system.
- Social isolation seemed to be the only strategy to slow or stop the spread of the disease.

The Response:

- Understandably, our response has been far from perfect.
- The pandemic found us ill-prepared. Our society is complacent and short-sighted, so the eruption of a life-threatening and highly contagious pathogen provoked a panic that was exacerbated by predictions that our medical system would be overrun.
- We have no established guidelines and our governmental systems are weakened through continual conflict and the erosion of competence, integrity, and moral authority.
- Scientists and economists find it difficult to prognosticate, as data shifts daily.
- Even when they can function, executive and legislative bodies, as well as governmental agencies, have a hard time deciding what to do, and in the process fail to evince confidence.

- Right or wrong, social isolation was deemed the only effective tool to meet the COVID-19 threat. Arguably, however, that response may prove to be more costly when compared to the virus itself, even in terms of fatalities.
- Consequently, the national plan is confusing, conflicted, or unstable.

The Debate:

- With health at risk and our financial system in free-fall, people are anxious, fearful, despondent, or angry.
- In an apparent leadership vacuum, more and more opinions are being expressed about alternative courses of action.
- Unfortunately, discussion is not limited to data and the merits of a particular strategy.
- Debate has now shifted into the field of blame, both for the genesis of the virus as well as the responses (past, present, and future).

The Forum for the Debate:

- Our whole world has experienced a revolution.
- The traditional media, which had standards of accuracy and expertise, have been replaced by social media, a “great equalizer.”
- Everyone now has a forum, without vetting, editors, peer review, or fact-checking.
- Opinions expressed in this universally accessible media are measured more by popularity (“views”) and emotional resonance (“likes”) than objectivity, competence, meaning, or truth.
- “Recommendation engines” active on those same media are designed to reinforce perceived prejudices, rope people into “filter bubbles,” and insure more user viewing, albeit from within an “echo chamber.”
- The same social media have become the principle news source for the majority of society and in the process we have seen a depredation of editorial function, information sharing, critical thinking, and civil discourse—forces that used to serve society’s integration.
- Without these important elements of Western democracy, the fragmentation and polarization of society are accelerating.
- Confidence in the rightness and righteousness of one’s cause becomes hyper-inflated; those holding opposing views are demonized as enemy combatants.
- A breaking of ranks by a party member, who enters into sincere dialogue with those of opposing views, is regarded as treason.
- Flaws or failures cannot be admitted, as they are wholly discordant with the triumphalistic affirmations recycled 24/7 within one’s social media community.

The Shape of the Debate:

- The general problems of social media have taken their toll on public debate around COVID-19.
- The discourse is, for the most part, uncivil, unproductive, and unworthy of Christians.
- The passions of anger, impatience, immoderation, presumption, irresponsibility, and judgmentalism prevail.
- Barely four months into the crisis, and on mere wisps of evidence or, more often, unsubstantiated rumors, critics rush to assign blame with respect to the cause of the outbreak or the nature of the response (e.g., China, military labs, previous administrations, pharmaceutical companies, corrupt individuals, the “deep state,” “globalists,” etc.).

- Ignoring the established protocols for imposing accountability through our justice system, people rush to judgement and attack the character and actions of the principals involved (e.g., President Trump, Anthony Fauci), calling them “criminals” and worse.
- Holders of minority opinions are becoming agitated, provocative, and threatening. In the U.S. demonstrators have appeared with rifles and Confederate flags, signaling a disrespect for the majority opinion and a militancy that hints of vigilantism.
- Lamentably but unsurprisingly, career public servants have received death threats (e.g., Anthony Fauci).

The Responsibilities of the Orthodox:

Examining the circumstances of the contemporary COVID-19 debates, Orthodox should be alarmed by most of what they see and reluctant to be involved. If, in good conscience, there is some need for involvement, precautions are in order:

1) Immunization to the ills of our society. Orthodox should not be ignorant of their vulnerability to social contagions which, like the virus itself, threaten to infect them unawares, unless, here too, they take appropriate measures of “social distancing”! To protect themselves against the deficits of social media, they must limit its use and understand its foibles. They must take countermeasures to train themselves and others in the virtues of Christian decorum that are attacked by social media: civility, humility, modesty and restraint in speech, self-doubt, respect for one’s neighbor (and partner in dialogue!), and love for one’s enemies.

2) Recognizing the true causes of social ills. Orthodox must not be deceived and drawn into struggles and battles against one another or other factions of society. They must remember that the causes of social ills are the passions of the human heart, which we must first address in ourselves if we wish to be of genuine assistance to those around us:

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? (St. James 4:1)

Thou hypocrite, cast out first the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to pull out the mote that is in thy brother's eye (St. Luke 6:42).

In the life of Saint Basil the Great and other Saints, we read how they would withdraw to solitary prayer and shed copious tears, accusing themselves for the world’s calamities.

3) Identification of our opponents. The battle line in the warfare that a Christian is called to engage is primarily “the line separating good and evil [that] passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart” (Alexander Solzhenitsyn). It is in our heart where we must “shed blood and receive the spirit”; where “the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.” As the Apostle Paul said, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Ephesians 6:12). Blessed Theophylact makes it clear that the Apostle is directing our struggle towards an interior, noetic struggle:

We Christians and fellow soldiers are not engaged in battle with opponents who are human, like ourselves, and share the same passions and power that we have.... We must wage war against the noetic and unseen princes and powers, the demons.... We Christians do not wrestle...against flesh and blood, that is, against visible, bodily enemies.... Do not imagine that the demons wage war against us, and we against them, over earthly trifles. No, we do battle for the heavenly, for the incorruptible and inexpressibly good things of the kingdom of God.... We must make war against all the

sinful passions and evil desires, and subdue them.... Only then can we stand fast. ...[To the extent that we, like the Ephesians, should have many visible enemies,] may you Christians not get angry at men, who are not at fault, but at the demons, who use men as vessels to war against you.

It is a beguilement to think that our proper warfare is against humans, societies, or nations. Similarly, we are beguiled if we war against inanimate entities in this world (e.g., technologies, medical procedures, etc.), all of which are morally neutral and assist for the sake of good or evil according to the intentions of those who employ them.

4) Focus on the aim of Christian life. Above all, regarding any troubling or demanding circumstance, Orthodox should be mindful of the Lord's admonition to Saint Martha: "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (St. Luke 10:41–42). In a word, the life of a Christian can be characterized as repentance, a continual transformation and renewal accomplished by a turning away from that which separates and towards that which unites him to His Creator. Its aim is nothing less than the "acquisition of the Holy Spirit" and, by Grace, union with God. As Saint Seraphim of Sarov also counseled, "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and around you thousands will be saved."

5) Public Discourse. To the extent that Orthodox should engage in debates, they should remember that their primary duty is not to win an argument. The perennial duty of Orthodox vis-à-vis public discourse is that their speech and conduct reflect their calling:

Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man (Colossians 4:6).

Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear (I St. Peter 3:15).

Fear, agitation, alarm, distress, aggression, outrage, and anger, especially when revealed in disputation, signal that we are "of the world" and off track in our Christian life. The Apostle set a high bar for our own demeanor and our relationship to society: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18). The human heart is a sanctuary which must be guarded by the peace which our Lord gives: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (St. John 14:27). "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts" (Colossians 3:15).

In Her own sanctuaries, our Mother, the Church, redirects our minds and hearts towards this peace multiple times a day:

In peace, let us beseech the Lord.
For the peace from above....
For the peace of the whole world....
Peace be unto all.

Our Lord instructed us to preserve our peace even in the worst circumstances, be it wars or virtual warfare: "When ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, be ye not troubled" (St. Mark 13:7). If, however, we allow any passion—even an ideological cause—to usurp our peace and rule in our hearts, we are guilty of no less than idolatry.

With respect to the particulars of public disputes, people should pursue their topic with decorum and the best skills of critical thinking, aiming to respect their opponent in dialog, discover relevant facts, and use reasoning skills to provide useful solutions that will benefit as many people as possible. Judgements of

character and motives (except for oneself, where we should always be harsh!) should absolutely be avoided. Simply put, our role in matters beyond the boundaries of the Church is to do good, not to exercise judgement. "For what have I to do to judge them...that are without [the Church]? ... But them that are without God judgeth" (I Corinthians 5:12).

6) Render unto Cæsar. If we are to engage in public discourse with the intention of influencing the political life of our country, we must understand and respect its rules. Foremost, in a democracy, is the principle of majority rule. A close second is respect for the rights of minorities. These principles put heavy responsibilities of civility on each side in a contest and assure the whole society that its disputes will be resolved peacefully. Winning a decision, the victors are reminded that they should not be triumphalistic over the losers, nor should they prevail to such an extent that the minority is deprived of certain essential privileges. The minorities, on the other hand, are expected to honor the principle of peaceful dispute resolution over the actual outcome and, correspondingly, to quash any temptation to rebel.

Similarly, all sides must respect established protocols for change, accountability, and justice. We have time-honored institutions of elections, overseeing agencies, and departments of justice, sufficient to remedy problems of corruption, incompetence, and criminal behavior. We should abhor any threat to these established protocols and exercise all patience in allowing them to play their roles. Vigilantism should be rejected at every instance as a threat to the very foundations of our society, regardless of our sympathies for the issues under contention.

7) Clergy must lead by example. The faithful look foremost to those who "have the rule" over them as exemplars whom they follow. Accordingly, Priests must be especially concerned to follow the guidelines and principles I have laid out above with respect to public discourse. In general, clergy should not make public statements that reveal their political affiliations or positions on public disputes. If they or their Hierarchs should judge that there are good reasons to speak about an issue, statements should be made with the utmost discretion. Clergy should never forget the likelihood that, even if they cheer ninety-nine of their faithful, there remains the risk that one will be scandalized and leave, a sin for which they will give an account to the Lord Himself.

8) The House of God and partisanship. Our Lord was incarnate and endured His Passion and Crucifixion to save all of mankind. If we drive a believer away in dispute of an issue that does not itself separate him from the Savior, we ourselves are complicit in our Lord's Crucifixion. The strict warnings we have in the Church for the preservation of the deposit of faith and protecting the faithful from beguilement or seduction to idolatry refer precisely to behavior or beliefs that affect the human heart, our Lord's preeminent sanctuary. That sanctuary is purified and hallowed through the Mysteriological and hesychastic life of the Church. It is for this domain that we must exercise vigilance and fidelity. Conversely, the giving of our hearts and minds to contentions, debates, civil and informational wars, and other passions or distractions constitute precisely the beguilement, the setting up of false gods, and the welcoming of false christs that we are to beware.

Simply put, clergy should not endorse causes or circulate materials or links that lend themselves to partisan interpretation, unless thoroughly explained (e.g., as examples of what should not be done). And what is circulated should be vetted and fact-checked, in light of the increasing tendency for rumormongering, confabulation, and outright lying. Finally, in their personal conduct clergy should prove themselves able to engage people of all types with good will and sincere attention to the arguments or concerns put forward.

In good conscience, a Priest should be able to affirm that in his parish there is neither Greek nor Jew, Republican nor Democrat, social isolationist nor re-integrator, vaccinator nor anti-vaccinator, and on, with an ever-expanding list of would-be opponents on issues inconsequential to salvation.

Your Humble Servant,

† Bishop Auxentios of Etna and Portland
Servant of Metropolitan Chrysostomos