



ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA
DIOCESE OF NEW YORK & NEW JERSEY

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Beloved Members of our Diocesan Family:
Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!

As we approach the great feasts of Our Lord's Birth and His Baptism, amidst the beauty and joy of the coming season, we face also the grim news of staggering figures throughout the counties of New York State:

- There has been a 58% increase in COVID-19 cases in New York State since Thanksgiving.
- We have seen a 92% increase in hospitalizations in New York State since last month.
- The uncertainty as to the effect of vaccines against the Omicron variant, and the speed of spread and the severity of the Omicron variant, remain unknown.

In our Diocese, we have not mandated that all parishioners must be vaccinated. We respect the privacy of all; and we have not asked anyone whether or not they have received the vaccine.

It is my sincerest desire that our faithful will come to Church Services during the Nativity and Theophany season, and feel as safe as possible. It is my goal to minimize, to the greatest extent possible, the risk that anyone coming to the services will contract the virus, become hospitalized ... or worse.

Therefore, I am urging all parishioners in our New York State parishes, whether or not they have been vaccinated, to wear masks in church during the weeks ahead, unless age or the advice of your medical provider precludes the wearing of a mask, until the numbers of COVID cases and hospitalizations come down.

I ask for your understanding that I have made this decision in the midst of a most difficult environment. Everyone is tired of COVID restrictions; everyone wants to go back to a "normal" lifestyle. No matter what decision is made, someone is sure to be unhappy.

I realize that masks alone will not bring an end to the pandemic. However, I would rather we wear them, and learn that we didn't need to ... than not wear them, and learn that someone became ill, or had to be admitted to the hospital, or worse, because we did not make a temporary sacrifice for the sake of the health and safety of our brothers and sisters.

Again, as your father in Christ, I sincerely beg you to recognize that the "vaccinated" or "unvaccinated" status of anyone, or the views of any individual or group regarding these COVID Guidelines, are not, and are not to become, a source of division, criticism, or indiscriminate discussion in the Church. The Church is a hospital, where health and healing are valued goals for everyone. Respect, love, and support are essential tools of Christian service in furthering those goals for every member of the parish family.

Any questions or concerns regarding these Directives should be conveyed to the Office of the Archbishop.

Asking the prayers of all for everyone in our Diocesan Family,

+ Michael

+ MICHAEL

Archbishop of New York and the Diocese of New York and New Jersey