



HOLY TRINITY GREEK ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL

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Friday, December 11th, 2020
Daniel the Stylite of Constantinople

Beloved Brothers and Sisters,

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt. 22:37-40, NKJV)

I write to you all today with love in the Lord as we approach the Feast of His Birth. We are in a time of preparation to receive the Child, born of the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin, Mary. As such we must take time to remember why we do the things that we do as people of faith, followers of Christ, and Orthodox Christians. The passage above reminds us of our great call from the Lord. The reason we do everything we do. It is not out of self-preservation that we live our lives of faith. No, it is for the sake of love. Chiefly, our love of God, and by extension, our love of neighbor.

The reality is, we cannot fulfill either of these great commandments apart from the other. St. John the Theologian and Evangelist, reminds us of this in his Epistle, writing, *“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?”* (1 Jn. 4:20, NKJV) This is a call to a very important quality that we as Christians must live, if we are to be called Christians at all. **To put others before ourselves—our desire, our will, even our freedom.** Taken together, the words of our Lord and His beloved disciple clearly point to a way of being that prioritizes others before ourselves.

Why am I writing this to you all? The truth is we are in a moment in history that demands us to live out this call in a very specific way. It is something that has become a challenge for many of us. However, we know that love is not always easy—neither is putting others before ourselves—but it is what we are called to do. I am referring to the present need to wear a mask during the divine services. In the grand scheme of life, this little act might seem like a miniscule effort, but it has become a topic that divides us. I am writing to ask you, as your Spiritual Father, to heed the call to love in this important way.

Why are we wearing our masks in Church? Why do you wear your mask? Some might say that it is to protect ourselves from the coronavirus. While this might be true, such a view does not bear the full weight of the Gospel message to love that I wrote about above. The reality is that with this view—one of limited scope—we can clearly see why some choose not to wear their masks or at least do so begrudgingly. They might say, *“I am not afraid of the coronavirus.”* This is a courageous position of course, but one no less centered on the self than the desire simply for self-preservation—which we have already said is not the way of the Gospel.

A reason for wearing the mask—more in line with our Orthodox faith—is to fulfill the two great commandments: to love God and our neighbor as ourself. The truth is that there are people who have expressed discomfort in the fact that not all of our members are heeding the call to wear a mask during the service. These are faithful people who want to be at the Divine services but have preexisting conditions—or loved ones who do, with whom they need to have close contact with regularly—which make them more susceptible to the more dangerous consequences of this virus. **The Church is indeed a hospital**, but like our hospitals that heal us from our physical ailments, we must make sure that the environment is safe for those who desire to come for treatment. Wearing a mask is one simple loving act that can allow for all who wish to come to our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Physician of our souls and bodies, to do so with ease of mind.

We wear masks not for our sake, but for the sake of others. As a means of loving our neighbor as ourself. For if we cannot love others in this simple way, how can we say with confidence that we love God? St. John, as I noted above calls into question whether our love for God is authentic if we cannot love our brothers and sisters. As the Spiritual Father of this community, I was called by God and assigned by our Spiritual Father, His Eminence Metropolitan, Alexios of Atlanta, four and a half years ago. **I was called to serve and to protect each one of you. Both those who attend and those who do not attend Church.** Together with the other clergymen of this community, I am praying for you day and night.

While this of course is a state mandate, I am calling you from a higher authority. This is a matter of fulfilling God's law, which demands that we love everyone. Love everyone, as Fr. Jonathan, Fr. Christian, Deacon George and I love each and every one of you. *What a great gift we could give to one another in imitation of our Lord, who was born in a cave and laid in a manger than to live and act for the sake of our love for God and neighbor.* This is our faith! This is our call! This is why we do what we do! This is what it means to be an Orthodox Christian!

Wish you and yours a most blessed and healthy Christmas Season.

With Love, Your Spiritual Father,

+Rev. Fr. Vasileios Tsourlis, Dean of the Cathedral

Vicar of the N.E. Conference of the Metropolis of Atlanta