



## An Interview with Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago: Promoting or endorsing agendas of fundamentalist thoughts will harm all of us

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**New York.- By Apostolos Zoupaniotis**

His Eminence Metropolitan Nathanael of Chicago is the younger member of the Holy Eparchial Synod of the Archdiocese of America, but during the past 30 days of the Coronavirus crisis, that changed everything in America, he took some really the tough decisions.

“The decision to suspend services throughout the Metropolis on Sunday, March 15<sup>th</sup> was the most difficult decision I’ve made as Metropolitan”, he told the Greek News in an exclusive interview.

Until then, the directive about the maximum number of people allowed to join a gathering was 250. But Nathanael seeking the advice of the experts, he was convinced that the regulation was based on highly inaccurate information.

“If I permitted services to continue as planned, the lives of thousands of people in Church that Sunday, as well as others who would come in contact with them following Church services, would be placed at risk. I requested additional advice; I reviewed the information; I asked questions, prayed, and then took action.”

His decision was approved by the vast majority of the faithful of the Metropolis, with the exception of a small group, the so called “Ephraimites”, who are known to place allegiance to the late Geron Ephraim of Arizona and a local monastery in Illinois. Some of them are pushing for a petition to Archbishop Epidophoros and Metropolitan Nathanael, to allow Church Services during the Holy Week.

“I have come to learn that these people are the modern-day Scribes and the Pharisees of antiquity. I have seen and experienced their true nature”, said Nathanael.

“They are selfish and their ego and pride is at the core of their actions. They advocate for blind obedience to select “spiritual fathers,” regardless of whether the guidance they receive is consistent with the teachings of the Church or not. They defend severe penances, even excommunication, handed down by their *gerontes* for moral lapses, but they refuse to accept when the Church calls for the temporary withholding of the Eucharist.”

**The Full text of the interview is as follows:**

**From the input you are receiving from the parishes, what is the situation with the pandemic in both our people and the community at large, in the states of your Metropolis? Do we have a lot of infected Greek Orthodox people?**

Unfortunately, we have dozens of parishioners across the six states of our Metropolis who have tested positive for COVID-19.

**Any data about G.O. people dead and funerals that took place?**

Unfortunately, a number of our Greek Orthodox brethren have succumbed to the Coronavirus, especially in the Chicagoland area. Some of our parishes have been stricken with multiple cases among their stewards.

In an effort to track the reach of the virus in our parishes, the clergy have been asked to report to the Metropolis when a parishioner is known to have tested positive for COVID-19. We are also keeping track of the number of deaths due to COVID-19. We mourn the loss of our brothers and sisters, yet because the Metropolis respects the privacy of people, we are not asking for people’s names or any other identifying information.

**What is the health situation with our priests?**

With God's help and with extra precautionary measures, none of our clergy have tested positive for COVID-19. Our clergy have been directed to remain steadfast during this pandemic. They are expected to continue to provide pastoral care to our people, but they are to follow all safety and precautionary measures as prescribed by the CDC and local authorities. This was especially emphasized to those clergymen who are at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 or who are caring for someone at home who is in this situation.

**How has the Metropolis and its organizations – especially the Philoptochos – dealt with the humanitarian aspect of this health crisis? Are there any initiatives to help people in need?**

Since the early days of the pandemic in the United States, the Metropolis has taken steps to assess the humanitarian crisis brought about by COVID-19. Thus far, the main response to this crisis has come from our parishes, which respond to COVID-19 one family at a time. Parishes are, within their means, providing direct financial and food assistance to members of our community and to the broader public.

Because not everyone is prepared to accept such assistance from the Church, the Metropolis is finalizing a program that will help our people find work during the COVID-19 crisis so that they may provide for their families' needs. The Metropolis of Chicago Philoptochos has provided financial support to local foodbanks throughout the six states of our Metropolis and have increased the funds available to their "Philanthropy Fund." Local Philoptochos Parish Chapters have provided assistance in numerous ways: they have distributed food directly to families and to local soup kitchens; they have established a phone tree network to check-in with senior members of parishes; and they have sewn protective masks to be distributed to local nursing homes and hospitals. Overall, we believe this humanitarian crisis will last for at least one year. It is my hope and prayer that individuals and organizations with influence rise to the occasion, work together, and help develop an assistance program that can be sustained for the long term. We have a unique opportunity to become a more authentic, caring and united Church as we work through this crisis. We are being challenged; it is up to each of us to act on behalf of the greater good.

**This Easter is going to be more different than anyone could imagine. What do you say to the people?**

I continue to marvel at the sacrifices being made by people all around us, especially by the first responders who enter the trenches every day with the sole purpose of protecting and caring for us. They are not able to choose who to treat, which means they are potentially exposed to the coronavirus numerous times each day. The faithful understand that during such times we are not only called to carry our own personal cross, but to also help carry the burden of society. There isn't much more to say to our people; they understand that Holy Week and Pascha are not going to be celebrated like in previous years. They have already come to terms with this, and I thank them for joyfully making this sacrifice for the overall good of society. But we have made a commitment to take Holy Week and Pascha into the homes of the faithful. We will all be praying – apart yet not alone – throughout this Season.

**I know that there are some people in Chicago that push for a petition to you and the Archbishop, asking for services to take place during the Holy Week and Holy Communion to be offered. What do you tell them?**

Unfortunately, there is a network of individuals that operate beneath the surface of the Church. They believe they have a *right* to the Eucharist. They believe that the Church is *theirs* and that no one has the right to keep them from it. Under normal conditions, they appear to be pious, humble and obedient members of the Church. They attend services regularly, participate in the sacraments frequently, and know prayers by heart, and so, they believe themselves to be advancing spiritually.

These last two years, and most especially during the COVID-19 crisis, I have come to learn that these people are the modern-day Scribes and the Pharisees of antiquity. I have seen and experienced their true nature. They are selfish and their ego and pride is at the core of their actions. They advocate for blind obedience to select “spiritual fathers,” regardless of whether the guidance they receive is consistent with the teachings of the Church or not. They defend severe penances, even excommunication, handed down by their *gerontes* for moral lapses, but they refuse to accept when the Church calls for the temporary withholding of the Eucharist.

To get their way, they will search for loopholes in directives and teachings of the Church. They will operate quietly so that those outside of their camp do not take notice of what they’re up to. Most recently, a physician from within this group sent a message to numerous individuals, including my clergy, informing them that somehow the coronavirus was no longer transmittable through the air. This person then concluded that our Churches should once again be open. A clergyman in this group then solicited the support of other physicians in a pressure campaign against me with the goal of bullying me to reopen Churches contrary to public health guidance, the advice of doctors in our Metropolis, and the decisions of the Holy Synod. I am truly saddened by this kind of behavior.

I am disappointed that during this worldwide crisis – at a time where we are called to unite, take care of one another, and let our best come out, this group, including the clergy within this camp, decide to sow dissent in a manner that puts lives at risk. Their claim to being called “fathers” is very much in doubt when they insist on putting the faithful – the very Church itself – at risk. If this overly loud minority insists on such behavior, they should sincerely reconsider their membership in this Church. In these historic times, when the Church is under tremendous stress, it is only our combined strength that will deliver us to the light. Promoting or endorsing agendas of fundamentalist thoughts will harm all of us.

### **Why the Holy Eparchial Synod didn’t take a unified position from the beginning Your Eminence, but it left the details to every metropolitan?**

From its first meeting on March 14<sup>th</sup>, the Holy Eparchial Synod has remained united around its approach to COVID-19. As a public health matter, responses to COVID-19 did not necessarily require uniformity for us to remain united. Indeed, the Synod was of one voice when it declared that local Hierarchs had the responsibility to make necessary decisions based on the needs of a particular region. This is important to keep in mind because the Holy Eparchial Synod and the Hierarchs are not making decisions based on our own opinion, but ground on the guidance offered by public health and medical professionals.

### **Didn’t you have second thoughts when in spite of being the youngest in the Synod, you made the clearest decision to close the churches?**

The decision to suspend services throughout the Metropolis on Sunday, March 15<sup>th</sup> was the most difficult decision I've made as Metropolitan. On Friday, March 13, the maximum number of people allowed to join a gathering was 250. I had received information from experts showing that this number was not accurate. Expert advisors explained to me that the inability to accurately test for COVID-19 meant that allowing 250 people to gather in our parishes would place these people at risk. They explained that very soon, the total number of people permitted to gather would go down very quickly. With this information in hand, I had to make a decision. If I permitted services to continue as planned, the lives of thousands of people in Church that Sunday, as well as others who would come in contact with them following Church services, would be placed at risk. I requested additional advice; I reviewed the information; I asked questions, prayed, and then took action. My job, as Metropolitan, is to make the difficult decisions when it matters. The decision was difficult to make, but I know it was the right decision because, according to first responders, it saved lives.

**Do you plan to visit various parishes, or you will just do the services from the Metropolis?**

Since the onset of this crisis, I have only celebrated services at my Cathedral. I will continue this practice for Holy Week.

**A Paschal Message for our readers.**

As we celebrate Pascha, I encourage your readers to find the hope of Pascha even in the most unfamiliar and uncomfortable moments in life. Especially during these challenging times, we are invited to enter the empty tomb of Christ when we feel alone or abandoned, and to allow the Light of the Resurrection to permeate our lives when we feel afraid or overcome by despair. Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!