

Church Attendance in a time of pandemic

TO: The Faithful parishioners of the Annunciation Church – Modesto

RE: Returning to worship in the Church Temple

The sacred mission of the Church is to bring people to “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 3:18). It is by this means that we come to know our Lord and to live our lives in pursuit of eternal life. It requires the commitment and conviction to live the life in Christ as an individual and within the community.

As a Church, we always pray for God to “*help us, save us, have mercy on us, and protect us...*” by His grace. We offer this petition in faith and love for both the spiritual and physical wellness of all. Our Divine Services are replete with prayers, petitions, and hymns that call upon our Heavenly Father to grant us good health and healing from afflictions.

The present Covid-19 pandemic has made us all aware of the seriousness this virus presents to our society. It has completely disrupted our lifestyle and turned our world upside down. Our prayers are offered for everyone’s safety and good health: to those who may have contracted the virus; to the medical personnel and researchers dealing with the virus daily; we pray that a treatment and vaccine may soon be found.

Continuing to pray for everyone to be safe from this virus, we are discussing ways to make church attendance available. In accordance with the diligent efforts being put forth by the Metropolis of San Francisco and with the direction of Stanislaus County, we are putting forth the following instructions:

1. There will be a limit as to how many people will be permitted to attend Divine Services in accordance with the Metropolis of San Francisco and the Stanislaus County Department of Health (the number we can have inside the church proper is approximately 100 – This number may vary and will be determined by the Parish Council. Should there be more, we will also have the hall open, once we have reached maximum capacity in church);
2. If you are 65+ years of age and are sick or considered vulnerable, you should consider viewing services online for the time being;
3. It is suggested that everyone should wear a mask;
4. Only the front doors of the church will be used and they will be kept open;
5. Have your offering in an envelope before you come to church and place it in the tray at the Narthex (there will be no passing of the tray in church);

6. The “Cry Room” will not be open to families with young children (only the restroom may be used);
7. Wash your hands regularly;
8. If one needs to cough, do so into your arm;
9. Social distancing (6’ from people not in your immediate family) will be expected;
10. Sanitizer in the Narthex will be available (we also encourage you to bring your own);
11. It is suggested that veneration of icons should be done by bowing before the icon and making the sign of the cross; it is not necessary to kiss the icon at this time (even though it is cleaned frequently).
12. No handshaking, hugging, or physical contact;
13. Do not touch your face;
14. Be prepared to have your temperature taken;
15. Sit with your immediate household (mother, father, and children only – people living in the same space and who arrived in the same vehicle);
16. Sit in the designated pews (only where there is a cushion);
17. You will be guided for Holy Communion by a member of the Parish Council; please stay 6 feet away from the next person (not a part of your immediate family);
18. When receiving Holy Communion, come forward, do not grab the Communion cloth, give your name;
19. When receiving Holy Communion, you are encouraged to lean your head back, open your mouth wide so that the priest may pour the Holy Eucharist into your mouth;
20. The priest will offer antidoron as usual at the end of the Divine Liturgy (it is not necessary to reverence the hand of the priest at this time);
21. Fellowship Hour will continue to be suspended.
21. Sunday Church School will resume on Zoom.

In addition to the above directives, we are adhering to the guidance of the Department of Health in Stanislaus County for faith-based organizations. These guidelines, some of which are also covered above, include:

- Parishioners should stay home if they or any member of their household is sick;
- Maintain social distancing of those not living in the same home a minimum of six feet;
- Practice good hygiene:
 - Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds;
 - Use hand sanitizers when soap and water are not readily available;
 - Do not touch your face;

- **Do not shake hands;**
 - **Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue or your cough/sneeze into your elbow;**
 - **Teach and reinforce health hygiene practices;**
 - **Ensure adequate supplies (e.g., soap, paper towels, hand sanitizer, tissue) to support health hygiene practices.**
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INTENSIFY CLEANING AND DISINFECTION EFFORTS

- Routinely (at least once per day, if possible) clean and disinfect surfaces and objects that are frequently touched. This may include cleaning objects/surfaces not ordinarily cleaned daily (e.g., doorknobs, light switches, sink handles, countertops, etc.)**
- Sanitize between services frequently touched surfaces (e.g., doorknobs, light switches, sink handles, countertops, books and worship materials etc.)**
- Provide wipes so that commonly used surfaces may be wiped down (e.g., keyboards, desks, remote controls, etc.)**
- Consider environmental controls that may prevent congregants from touching surfaces (e.g., leaving doors propped open)**
- Ensure adequate cleaning and disinfection supplies**
- Reopening Guidance and Cleaning and Disinfection for Community Facilities direction is provided by the CDC**

CONGREGANTS AT HIGH RISK

Congregants at high risk should be strongly discouraged from attending worship services in person.

- People aged 65 years and older**
- Those with high risk conditions which can include**
 - **Chronic lung disease or moderate to severe asthma**
 - **Serious heart conditions**
 - **Immunocompromised including cancer treatment**
 - **Severe obesity**
 - **Other medical conditions such as diabetes, renal failure or liver disease**

IDEAS TO PROTECT THOSE MOST AT RISK

- Encourage high risk populations to continue to self-isolate and participate via online services**

- Encourage communication with small groups via platforms that allow face-to-face visual
- Access to recorded services
- Identify plan/volunteers to connect with those at risk (e.g., phone calls, online, letters)

CONSIDERATION FOR MODIFYING RITES, RITUALS AND SERVICES

While we are all looking forward to returning to a normal pattern of life and faith practice, the effort required to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus has impacted all areas of life. It is not the intent of Stanislaus County to determine for you and your faith community how to modify or adjust your faith practice to support the requirement of social distancing or sanitization. Faith centers need to make every effort to provide a safe environment. As leaders, we want our congregants to feel safe during worship and to decrease their risk getting the virus. These decisions are being left to the discretion of each faith leader and community. Please consider the following as you reopen your places of worship.

- Provide a stationary location(s) and/or mail or electronic contribution options. Avoid passing any communal donation collection device.
- Modify religious activity involving communal food/drink
 - Faith leaders should always wash their hands or use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol prior to conducting the service
 - Given the diversity of communal food and drink practices in our faith communities, we are asking each organization's religious leaders to practice in a manner consistent with their faith while aligning with state and county orders on social distancing and sanitization.
 - Maintain safe food handling practices
- Modify all gatherings to incorporate social distancing measures (members of an immediate household may sit together – all others should maintain social distancing)
- Drive-in worship services are permitted per Stanislaus County Public Health Order effective April 24, 2020
- Consider utilizing small gatherings with inclusion of additional participants via streaming or digital options

- Small gatherings should be at location where physical distancing can be maintained
- Small gatherings should also be advised to follow disinfecting procedures following the gathering whether in a faith center or home gathering
- High-risk populations should be encouraged not to attend in person
- Physical location should be large, well-ventilated, maintaining about 6-foot distance between individuals by having members sit in alternating rows or otherwise spread out
- Consider adding or shortening worship services to allow for social distancing
- Singing should only be allowed while wearing face coverings. Singing aerosolizes the virus and accelerates transmission by propelling it farther than the 6-foot social distancing requirement.
- Regarding babies, toddlers, children, and youth ministries (Birth – 18yrs), we recommend continuing to postpone these activities or to provide them online only since it is very difficult to expect children and youth to carry out the social distancing guidelines. Families that want to attend a service should have children/youth sit with them during this season.
- Regarding water-based worship practice: Depending on the specific practice including implied urgency to a specific faith, there may be possible ways to perform these practices in a manner consistent with social distancing and sanitation rules. Please consider and apply the appropriate and safe manner for this practice within your faith community.
 - For those faiths that allow for (or do not prohibit) water treatment within their respective worship practices, please refer to the following guidance from the CDC (on the effects of chlorine and bromine on the COVID-19 virus. [_____](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/water.html)
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/water.html>

Once again, please keep in mind that your Parish leadership is attentive to the needs and well-being of our parishioners. We will continue to monitor the county's regulations and guidelines in order to meet the needs of our Parish.

We are grateful that we have had our Divine Services livestreaming for a number of years. Many of our parishioners, along with others from around the world, have been following our services online.

In addition, we ask that you be attentive to the obligations our Parish continues to have as we minister to you. Stewardship and other donations may be made online at our Parish Website:

<https://www.goannunciation.org/contribute-online/stewardship>

<https://www.goannunciation.org/contribute-online/other-donations>

As we continue to pray for you, we ask that you pray for us as well. We miss you and we send you our love.

Faithfully yours,


Rev. Fr. Jon Magoulias
Parish Priest


Rev. Fr. Michael Sergakis
Assistant to the Priest