

St. Barbara Monastery – 15799 Ojai Road – Santa Paula, CA 93060
(805) 921-1563 – www.stbarbaramonastery.org

CHRIST IS BORN!
GLORIFY HIM!





Dear Friends of St. Barbara Monastery,

We send each and every one of you our heartfelt Christmas greetings and hope all of you were able to celebrate a truly joyful Christmas Day. May we all continue throughout this holy season to receive the blessing of this Great Feast deep into our hearts and souls! “GOD IS WITH US!” the Church proclaims at the Christmas Vigil, expressing the essential reason for our joy. Let these same words echo ceaselessly within us, for truly GOD IS WITH US!

To our greetings we add our deepest thanks for all you have done for us throughout this unusual year. Especially over the past few weeks, the monastery has received numerous Christmas cards, gifts and messages raising the spirits of everyone in our small community by reminding us that God has given us the rich gift of good Friends—true Friends, who pray for our monastery, care about it and, indeed, uphold it!

Perhaps you were among those who were able to be present in church for the Christmas services. More likely, you were among the many who had to remain at home—perhaps “attending” the services by watching them as they were broadcast on the Internet. Whatever your circumstances, rejoice! Let us all unite with our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world in proclaiming “GOD IS WITH US!”

Abbess Victoria
and the sisters
of St. Barbara Monastery

Recently, we unexpectedly received from our good friends Fr. Iosif and Christina Bena the following excellent article written by Presbyteria Christina entitled “What is the Role of Christians During the Pandemic?” While the views on this subject are numerous (and sometimes contentious), this is the first time we have found a discussion of certain key issues pursued firmly in the context of the Gospel teaching. It is our hope that our readers will find this article helpful as we come to the end of this unusual year.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANS DURING THE PANDEMIC?
Presbyteria Cristina Bena, PhD

The coronavirus pandemic, as we see more and more, brings suffering, death and loneliness. We tremble at the thought of those who find themselves in the hospital, in terrible suffering, unable to be close to their families, dying alone, unable to confess, to commune, to see a priest. It is not at all an innocuous suffering and, unfortunately, it is not at all rare.

So what can we Christians do to alleviate this suffering, to help and comfort the sick, to show our love for our neighbor?

At similar times in the past, Christians cared for the sick, did not leave them alone when society or the family abandoned them: I would like to compare this with what is happening now, and offer a reflection on how this Christian ideal would translate today.

As we know, the current pandemic is unique in at least two ways. The first is that seriously ill coronavirus patients need hospital care. Our role as Christians is therefore not to deal directly with the medical care of the sick; today's society, based on a Christian model, has a well-developed structure, and takes care of bodily illness much better than we could.

The second difference is that many transmit the disease without having any symptoms, which puts us in a very peculiar position: we risk making those around us sick without knowing if we are sick ourselves or not. And this brings us to the paradox that, in order to protect others, we must stay away from them and wear a mask when we need to get closer. This “social distancing” and the wearing of the mask is actually the main topic I want to address and which is something new in the history of the Church, something that I think deserves a special approach in the present context.

The first thing I would like to argue is that social distancing is a form of asceticism: the asceticism of the apparent distance from the other, the asceticism of the lack of touch, of encounter. And then the asceticism of wearing a mask, the weight of sometimes feeling suffocated, frightened by the apparent lack of air. These are now asked of us as a sign of love, so as not to make the other sick by our physical proximity.

I find this requirement to wear a mask extremely Orthodox, and ultimately a test for each of us. Do we love our neighbor enough to do it, do we respect him enough, can we overcome our helplessness and discomfort out of love for him?

But wearing a mask is not only a form of asceticism, but also a gesture of humility. It is sometimes said that it is ridiculous, that we do not look good with a mask, that people make fun of us. But we must remember the Lord Whom we serve. What did Christ do when He was crucified? Was He not mocked, ridiculed, spat upon, and He endured all with love? If we are His servants, can we not bear the ridicule of a mask before the world, out of love for those around us?

Wearing a mask is a sign of humility too because we do it out of obedience. Not obedience to our desires, or to what we hear on TV and in the social media, but to the Church. And the Church by the mouth and example of our bishops very clearly exhorts us to wear a mask in the churches.

The ability to follow these rules is therefore a test of asceticism and humility. If in the past the cross of Christians was to be martyred for not abandoning Christ, or to expose themselves to the risks of sickness and death by caring for the others, our cross, as ones whose faith is much weaker, is much lighter. We are asked to show our love for those around us through this little effort, through this small gesture of obedience and asceticism: keeping our distance and wearing a mask.

And I have to say, with a lot of pain in my soul, that this is a test that most Orthodox Christians have failed to pass. Orthodox Christians are champions at not wearing a mask at church. How many believers revolt instead, finding excuses, saying that it is not spiritual, that it is too hard, that wearing a mask and following certain rules is a sign of persecution and deprivation of liberty?

Because of this, I believe we are nearing one of the saddest situations in the history of the Church. The Lord has warned us, "the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God." (John 16: 2) And this is exactly what is happening now: there are many Christians who do not want to follow these simple rules and thus endanger

the lives of those around them. And furthermore, they do this believing that these rules are not spiritual, that they are not appropriate to the church, and they imagine that by rejecting these rules they are glorifying God. And they confuse freedom and faith with bravery and the urge to tempt God.

We are often given the example of the saints who by their faith moved mountains, who were not afraid of disease, who stood in the midst of the fire, and who were bitten by venomous serpents, without anything happening to them. But we forget that compared to these saints we are just naive children, and we have much less faith. We are in the self-delusion of being great wonderworkers, but we are being deceived by pride. God is not a magician and true miracles are rare. They are revealed to those who are truly advanced in the faith and cannot be asked from God as from a vending machine.

And unfortunately, because of this deception, the number of believers, priests, bishops, and even patriarchs, who fall ill and die because of the coronavirus, continues to increase day by day. These servants of the Church are a difficult treasure to replace; many of them are old and sick, and should be the first to be protected, but unfortunately they are sometimes the first victims of the disease because of the behavior of the faithful or of their concelebrants who refuse to protect them by wearing a mask.

And we continue every day to see photos and videos with churches full of people who do not follow social distancing, and many of the faithful unfortunately become propaganda agents against it. And so we become co-responsible for the suffering of the world; instead of relieving this suffering we amplify it, failing deeply in our role as Christians who should help, seek, and comfort those around us.

On the contrary, the Church could be exactly that engine, that heart and center from which the fight against disease begins, the source from which spring attention and love for others, the exhortation to asceticism, of the observance of the rules that reduce the suffering of our brethren.

So, in conclusion, what is our role as Christians in the midst of the current pandemic? First, to protect those around us, to show them our love by following the rules and wearing a mask, because it is not a sign of fear and lack of faith, but a sign of love. Furthermore, we should never forget to help those who are suffering physically or materially and to be present alongside those who are alone.

Second, we should repent wholeheartedly. And understand that everything that happens is a sign from the Lord, to look inside, and solve the problems that are within us, and not to focus on the problems of others. When we can no longer celebrate the Liturgy with the faithful, or cannot go on a pilgrimage, instead of declaring ourselves persecuted, we should rather turn to ourselves, wonder-



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ring: is this all not allowed by the Lord as a message, as a call to change ourselves? Doesn't He want to tell us something about our spiritual state?

So let us continue our lives in peace, without fear, strengthening and encouraging those around us, comforting and bringing relief when we can, by obeying the Lord, and following the rules. And with a heart at peace for having done our duty, with confidence in the Lord and with the conviction that "whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14: 8)

Presbytera Prof. Cristina Bena, PhD, HDR

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