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# Shaping Worship During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Ministry of Presence at St. Anna Greek Orthodox Church, Roseville, California

Greek Orthodox Christian worship is consciously embodied. Christopher Flesoras, a Greek Orthodox priest, discusses pastoral discernment for serving the faithful when public health needs require social distancing, also known as physical distancing.

**By:** [Christopher Flesoras](#), [Joan Huyser-Honig](#)

**Tags:** [communion](#), [coronavirus](#), [covid-19](#), [covid-19 series](#), [technology](#), [trauma](#), [worship planning](#)

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shaping worship during  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Christopher D. Flesoras:** [St. Anna Greek Orthodox Church](#) pastor; Air National Guard chaplain; adjunct faculty at William Jessup University and Fuller Theological Seminary.

**Current city:** Roseville, California

**Denominational context:** [The Greek Orthodox Church of America](#) (GOA)

**Worship roles:** Flesoras's role as a priest is to perform the worship as ordered by GOA liturgical tradition.

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**COVID-19 situation** (as of April 6, 2020): Our church has a few hundred families. As of March 20, 2020, we're limited by the state to gatherings of no more than ten people, and each person must maintain a social and physical distance of at least six feet. So, like many faith communities, we have transitioned to online services. We have also been instructed to mitigate the risks of home or pastoral visits.

As of late, it seems as though the governor is allowing local counties or cities to discern what in fact is an “essential service.” We do have mandates from our local hierarch, the Archbishop of America, and also the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (our first among equals), though, as to how we are to navigate these waters. Simply, we are to exercise pastoral discernment to best serve the faithful. In our case, the parish administrator, my brother priest, and I still maintain a ministry of presence at the church. People may stop by to light a candle and say a prayer or even receive a blessing. If there is a sacrament scheduled (marriage or baptism, for instance), we are to either reschedule or mitigate risks through limiting attendance and maintaining social distancing.

In late March, I was put on orders as an Air National Guard chaplain, so the days have been and will continue to be long.

**What’s working well—or not:** Online services are far from ideal, but they are well attended. We do the service in the nave and sanctuary with a Mevo camera operator, two priests, a deacon, an altar server, and two chanters. We have recorded and archived these services on our church’s Facebook page. But at some point, we will probably just livestream, not record, because we want the faithful in any setting to gather for worship at the same time as one body. We also plan to upgrade our technology for a better feed.

The world is always ailing, and we as the church can never stop being who we are, physically and spiritually. We have to consider the profound effects of baptism, the eucharist, holy unction, and the sacrament of confession, which are types of medicine or treatments for our spiritual and physical well-being. Taking communion at home, in isolation, certainly does not fit our Orthodox piety. It is the fullness of us coming together by grace, under the same bishop, at the same altar, proclaiming the same faith. Furthermore, the means by which we offer the eucharist—both consecrated elements being in a common chalice and administered by a common spoon—really cannot be modified in a hasty manner. So for now, at least, most of our faithful are not receiving the eucharistic gifts of bread and wine.

**Most helpful worship resources:** As our services are ordered and informed by our liturgical tradition, we currently use AGES Initiative, a digital chant stand, as a platform. We send the link of the text and also a PDF for our faithful before each service.

Also, our Greek Orthodox tradition of the Great Lent is helpful. While other churches may be worried about ways to do online giving, it’s our Lenten exercise to focus giving only on stewardship, benevolence, and philanthropy. If we’re doing our Lenten fasting, then we have more money to give for other people’s needs. We don’t ask the faithful to support our capital campaign during Lent. We’re all dealing with COVID-19 concerns, but we’ve intentionally framed our correspondence by noting that this is Great and Holy Lent. Praying for all who are ill and all who administer cures for the ailing is truly part of our Lenten *askesis* (spiritual discipline).

**Needs, questions, or insights to share:** We hope communities are truly struggling with the pastoral, ecclesiastical, and theological implications of how to be a prophetic voice. Churches are responding to this dynamically changing pandemic. Yet ministry can’t be reactive. It must be prayerful and thoughtful. The precedents we set in this moment may shape generations to come. As we use virtual worship, we need to

remain informed by our history and keep our eyes ever on the kingdom to come. We don't want to convey a message that, even after the virus is done, it's okay to stay home and watch rather than participate in communal worship of and at church. Simply, we have to serve our people in this moment considering the implications of these decisions on our faithful and our parishes going forward.

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we shouldn't make our prayers only about this pandemic.***

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every type of ailment within our parishes.***

***Some continue to battle cancer or other life-threatening diseases,  
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due to tragedy, illness, or even a miscarriage."***

**—Christopher Flesoras**

Also, while it's good to pray specifically about COVID-19 needs, we shouldn't make our prayers only about this pandemic. There remain people dealing with every type of ailment within our parishes. Some continue to battle cancer or other life-threatening diseases, while others endure the loss of a loved one due to tragedy, illness, or even a miscarriage. We must continue to pray for each of these individuals and families as well as those who are COVID-19-positive. And, we need to pray for all researchers and health care workers, not just those dealing with the pandemic.

## **LEARN MORE**

The Greek Orthodox Church in America offers a [digital COVID-19 toolkit](#), including instructions on [how to livestream worship](#). Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the United States of America also has excellent COVID-19 advice, including [how to maintain youth and young adult ministries](#) when you can't gather in person. Read an Ancient Ministries blog post about how Abba Zosima, a sixth-century desert father, practiced [Lenten distancing](#).

## **Comments**



Christopher Flesoras

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As containment of COVID-19 forces your worshiping community to implement shelter-in-place worship and practice social isolation, we offer these resources to help you plan and cope in ways that encourage and support your community. These resources were initially created from events and in response to different situations and can be adapted for worship that encourages prayer and Christian community during this time of social distancing necessary to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

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