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Bulgarian Church leader insists sacraments cannot transmit coronavirus



Church leader causes storm by claiming services need not stop, as it is impossible to catch virus from healing sacraments – a view health professionals dispute.

Metropolitan Neofit of Sofia, the Patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, has drawn anger – and some ridicule – after his office said church services would continue in the country – despite concerns about transmission of the coronavirus – as the holy sacraments could not possibly transmit a disease.

“Services will not be canceled and everyone who wants to get close to Holy Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ should not be convinced otherwise because of fears over coronavirus,” the Church said. “Holy Sacraments cannot transmit any contagion or disease as they are a medicine for mental and physical healing and health,” it added.

Health professionals disagree – as do many other churches that have suspended services and even funerals, and told parishioners to tune in to their priests online rather than in person.

In mainly Orthodox countries, like Bulgaria, there is particular concern about the custom of believers kissing icons and so passing on the illness.

So far, six people have tested positive for coronavirus in Bulgaria, in Sofia, Gabrovo and Pleven. Over 1,000 tests have been run so far and the country is also fighting an epidemic of influenza. On Wednesday a ban on indoor events was lifted, but remains in place for events involving more than 250 people.

In neighbouring Romania, the Orthodox Church on Wednesday called on believers to respect the recommendations issued by the authorities and said believers with symptoms should stay isolated or under quarantine and avoid attending church services.

Late in February, the Romanian Orthodox Church told believers to abstain from kissing icons in case they inadvertently caught or spread the disease.

Some Bulgarians took to social media on Wednesday to accuse the Church of putting its head in the sand for claiming that “the sacraments have healing powers in a situation like this”. “This is the definition of a crime,” a Twitter user in Bulgaria said.

But the tough stance of the Church in Bulgaria is supported to the south, in Greece. On Monday, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece issued a statement insisting that Holy Communion does not transmit the virus.

The statement comes after days of heated debate in Greece about whether the Church should adopt more drastic measures to limit the potential spread of the disease.

In much of Europe, Africa and the Americas, the response by churches has been more pragmatic, with both Catholic and Protestant churches emptying hold water bowls and banning the use of the communion cup and the traditional hand-shake.

— Source: balkaninsight.com