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Technology helps but priests feel pain of separation from their flock



As one priest told Neos Kosmos on Monday, the Church has faced wars, invasions plagues and famines but the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic has sparked a response that is unprecedented in the ancient institution's great history – the closing to worshippers of church doors, the distancing of priests from their worried flocks across the world.

In a communiqué of 18 March, the Ecumenical Patriarchate announced its decision to suspend all ecclesiastical rites until the end of the month.
On 31 March it announced: "Already, because cases of COVID-19 are dramatically multiplying throughout the world, with many casualties, and because, for this reason, the imposition – and rightly so – of strict and restrictive measures continue in almost every country, the above mentioned ban will unavoidably remain valid for the Sacred Center of the Phanar and the Dioceses of the Ecumenical Throne throughout the globe until further notice, depending on the course of the pandemic."

So the church bells have fallen silent, the doors are closed and people must keep their distance the best they can. The timing has been unfortunate because the biggest, most important dates in the Christian calendar, whether Orthodox or other, the mourning and celebrations of Easter will soon be on us but we are now in uncharted territory as to how we will go about celebrating this most social of

religious events.

Technology has helped in some ways to lessen the physical divide imposed by Covid-19. Many churches now host services that are viewed live on Facebook or Youtube and Neos Kosmos has publicised the times for these “broadcasts”. Some priests hold conference calls with their parishioners or are rely on the telephone to deal with personal matters raised by a troubled member of the church.
It has taken some adjusting. Father Jordan Krikelis of the St John the Forerunner in Melbourne’s Carlton North says the emphasis is to “try and pray as normal that is what the divine liturgy is about to prepare for the Holy Eucharist.”

“People need their prayer and some will come and stand outside the church,” he said. “People are keeping faith in difficult times and this is another trial in life.”

Fr Emmanuel Lykopantis of St Dimitrios Greek Orthodox Church of Moonee Ponds and Ascot Vale, said his church was not conducting live services via the internet but it was promoting the Youtube and Facebook services the Cathedral of the Annunciation in Redfern, Sydney.

“The services at the Cathedral are being conducted by the archbishop (Archbishop Makarios of Australia) and are recorded to a professional level with four to five cameras being used,” said Rev Emmanuel.

“We have our own posts on Facebook which the children have set up for their parents and we have 2 000 followers. Normally we get under 200 people attending a service on a Sunday although there will be more for a Mnimosino (memorial service).
“But nothing beats a one-on-one with people. It is tough not seeing people coming to light a candle or asking us to say a prayer,” he said.

“The pastoral nature of the ministry has changed dramatically. We can’t visit and sit and share a coffee. We now communicate on the telephone or through social media.

“Sometimes people leave a message under the church door. I have to think of ways and means to reach people,” he said.

“We are soon to celebrate our biggest feast and everyone will want to commune to light the Holy Light and be part of the Easter celebration but this year we cannot do that.”

He said the church had a Facebook page since 2011 and a web page since 2016.

He said many of the elderly parishioners were also watching Greek television by satellite and that was also helping them to stay in contact with the Church.

“I have lost one part of my ministry life but, on the other hand, I am sharing in the pain of the people. It is a mentally challenging time – it is hard to say prayer to an empty bunch of seats. We have to have faith,” said Fr Emmanuel.

At St Haralambos at Doncaster and Templestowe, Fr Antonio Cagnoni said the changes of the past few weeks had been very dramatic on the life of the parish.

“ I tend to seven nursing homes, there are bible study groups and catechism classes, all of which are closed,” said Fr Antonio.

“Weddings and baptisms have been delayed. Then there are problems to re-book venues later in the year.

“As a priest I feel isolated from my people. It hurts emotionally and spiritually, said the priest who serves as an assistant to Fr Elias Kentrotis, who is 70 and is in self isolation because of his age.

“We have been able to livestream the services. After Easter will be be using the technology available to connect with people through Face Time to run catechism and Bible study classes.”

Fr Antonio said the parishioners had been very good in obeying the laws and keeping away from the church.

“They understand that if we break the rules, we are disobeying our archbishop and breaking government laws. We have repeated that message in our live streams. This does not change the fact that you have to pray and observe Lent and you can turn your home into a church,” said Fr Antonio.

Fr Synesios Frangos of The Dormition of our Lady in North Altona said the church could do nothing but obey the rules the government put in place to protect the people from receiving the infection.
“We are praying to God for the parish but it feels terrible, in a spiritual way and in our hearts. We cannot express, teach or give the message of the Gospel to the people.

For now he said the parishioners would be able to be part of the liturgy through the church’s Facebook page and website.

For now the liturgy is conducted by the priest with a minister and psalter in attendance.

“Sometimes people knock on the door for communion but we cannot open. There is a big fine and there is the fear of passing the sickness on to others.

“I tell the people to be patient that this will pass. I hope a miracle happens so that it will make it easier to celebrate Easter,” said Rev Synesios.

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