09/04/2020

Easter 2020: Bulgarian Orthodox Church's flight to fetch 'Holy Fire' cancelled



A flight on a Bulgarian government aircraft to Israel to fetch the "Holy Fire" – a key part of Eastern Orthodox Christian Easter rituals – by a Bulgarian Orthodox Church representative has been cancelled, it was announced on April 9.

The money that would have been spent on the flight will be redirected to the fight against Covid-19.

The announcement came after talks between Prime Minister Boiko Borissov and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's governing body, the Holy Synod, headed by Patriarch Neofit.

The talks were the second successive bid by the Bulgarian government to press home its concerns to the Holy Synod about the risks of spreading Covid-19 during the Orthodox Christian Easter period.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church has kept its houses of worship open, unlike other

faith groups in Bulgaria. It has been implementing disinfection procedures and some of the church's leaders have made public calls for people to stay at home instead of going to church for Easter services.

After the April 9 talks, Lovech Metropolitan Gavriil, speaking at a joint briefing with Prime Minister Boiko Borissov, Health Minister Kiril Ananiev and Interior Minister Mladen Marinov, said that the Holy Synod had decided to expand on the measures it had agreed on at a sitting on March 30.

Gavriil said that instead of fetching the "Holy Fire" from Jerusalem, the flame preserved from last year would be distributed.

The "Holy Fire" annual ritual at Easter involves what Orthodox Christians believe to the miraculous igniting of a flame at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This year, restrictions will be in place at that church to prevent the usual crowding.

On Palm Sunday, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church will not distribute willow branches, as it customarily does. The Orthodox Easter normally sees large crowds of people going to churches to fetch the branches. Gavriil described the cancellation of distribution of willow branches as "no small compromise".

Easter services, instead of starting inside churches, will start outside. Care will be taken to ensure people maintain physical spacing, the briefing was told.

Icons are being regularly disinfected in churches, and disinfectant mats placed at the entrances. The Synod has recommended that people coming to the churches wear protective masks.

Asked what would happen about Orthodox clergy from North Macedonia getting the "Holy Fire" from the Bulgarian delegation, Gavriil said that he was sure that the clergy in North Macedonia also had preserved last year's flame.

Borissov said that he had been assured by all the metropolitans that quarantine measures would be kept to during the Easter season.

"I am not a member of the clergy and I can call on Bulgarians to not go to the churches," Borissov said.

"The metropolitans told me that there are many people who are in low spirits, desperate. There are thousands who go because of tradition – I can call on them not to go. The bells will peal, they saved us from slavery," he said in an apparent reference to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's role in resisting Ottoman rule.

“The confidence and strength of the people are very important,” Borissov said.

He said that he had informed the Holy Synod that public broadcaster Bulgarian National Television would show the services live on air, so people who heeded the call to stay at home could do so.

Borissov said that a number of measures have been put in place in the name of the life and health of Bulgarians, to limit the spread of the coronavirus.

“On the one hand, we have banned going to the parks, we have forbidden people to go out into the mountains, so if we let them go out (to church) so massively, I am very afraid that there will be a big contagion,” he said.

He said that if people showed self-discipline during the Easter holidays, perhaps the government would be able to lift the ban on visiting public parks and gardens.

Interior Minister Marinov, responding to a question from a reporter, said that while the media was focusing the issue of the church services, he was more concerned about the risk if Bulgarians kept to the tradition of large family gatherings during the Easter holidays. He urged people not to travel, not to hold large gatherings and to adhere to all anti-coronavirus precautions.

Several days ago, the head of the national operational headquarters, Major-General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, appealed to Bulgarians not to go to church at Easter services.

— Source: sofiaglobe.com