04/10/2020

New Hampshire Warns Greek Orthodox Clergy to Cease Communion After Coronavirus Outbreak



After reopening this Spring, Greek Orthodox worshipers have been receiving Communion as usual in their parish churches, hoping against hope that they would not be infected with the coronavirus by reception of the Mysteries.

However, an outbreak did occur, at St. Nicholas' Greek Orthodox Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in early September, and this has led to the state's attorney general taking action to stop the practice.

Associate Attorney General for New Hampshire Anne Edwards warned the church on September 25 to cease and desist in offering Communion to worshippers. In a letter sent to Metropolitan Methodios, whose diocese encompasses most of New England, she stated "The Greek Orthodox practice of using a single, shared chalice and spoon appears to be a possible source of the COVID-19 outbreak at St. Nicholas."

Communion Banned

She then went on to warn him and all the other church leaders of what she termed “further legal enforcement actions to achieve compliance.” This would mark what some believe is the first time in American history that a state has told a religious entity that they are banned from offering Communion.

Edwards clarified in great detail what the executive orders meant to the church and stressed that despite terms such as “guideline” being used in the official letter, the orders that the church received are “mandatory.”

One part of the order, which is titled Executive Order 52, stipulates that “Communion and Eucharist, for example, should not involve a shared cup or passing of a plate between people.”

Metropolitan Methodios responded by saying that Communion in the Orthodox Church cannot be changed, “especially under pressure from external factors.”

In the face of what cold have turned out to be an ugly confrontation between church and state leaders in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, New Hampshire Governor Chris Sununu backtracked, saying in a press conference “We don’t want our guidance to interfere with how people practice their religion.”

He continued, saying that he would “encourage” people to follow the guidelines already laid down to protect against he virus and that he would urge them to understand what may happen if they do not so so.

St. Nicholas Closed for Two Sundays

On Thursday, Edwards announced that church and state officials had jointly agreed to close the church the weekends of Sept. 13 and 20.

St. Nicholas’ indeed kept its doors closed last weekend.

So far, three individuals from the church were reported to have contracted Covid-19 on September 11 and another three people who are positive were discovered through contact tracing. One victim has been hospitalized in the outbreak at the present time.

Back in June, the Metropolitan had maintained that the practice of Holy Communion using a communal spoon and chalice would continue. On June 29, he wrote on the

Diocesan website that the church believed there was “no need for a change of this mode, especially under pressure from external factors.”

“Mystery of the Divine Eucharist Non-Negotiable”

An official communique from other Greek Orthodox leaders accompanied Methodios’ statement, which said “The Mystery of the Divine Eucharist is non-negotiable … and it is impossible that through this Mystery of Mysteries any disease might be communicated to those who partake.”

However, the letter also urges local leaders to deal appropriately with “problematic situations that arise from local laws of the State” in every church.

New Hampshire Attorney General Edwards stated to interviewers that she had read the statements on the Diocesan website and has also had discussions with a lawyer representing the Metropolitan.

Edwards also admitted that at present she does not know whether if there has been an agreement on future practices but that she does “expect a written response in the near future.”

The New Hampshire newspaper *The Manchester Union Leader* stated that it had sent an email to the offices of the Boston Metropolitan seeking comment but that they had not received a reply.

Arthur Kyricos, the president of St. Nicholas’ parish council admitted that he was one of the parishioners who had come down with Covid-19 on September 8, experiencing “flu-like symptoms” before recovering.

He added that no one has died in the outbreak, nor is anyone associated with St. George’s seriously ill, but he acknowledged that “Changes to the use of the chalice are under discussion between the Attorney General’s office and the Metropolitan’s office.”

The parish council president said that the church has created a comprehensive protocol for worshippers and that he believes that an asymptomatic person had been responsible for spreading the virus at St. Nichalas.

Along with most other churches in the US at the present time, Kyricos said that his parish “asks health-related questions and takes the temperature of anyone entering the building.”

Additionally, parishioners are obligated to wear masks, keep social distance from one another and use hand sanitizer.

He added that s safety committee developed the protocols based on federal Centers of Disease Control guidelines.

Source