

Resumption of services welcomed after months of online worship



After months of hard lockdown measures in Melbourne the easing of the COVID-19 regulations that all but halted religious life in parishes is starting to stir again with churches being allowed to open their doors to 10 people per service and the hope that this will increase to 20 or more on 8 November.

Archepiscopal Vicar of the District of Northcote in Victoria – he is responsible for Northcote and Western Victoria – Reverend Evmenios Vasillopoulos, said the hoped-for increase in November to 20 worshippers per service inside the church and 50 outside would bring Melbourne in line with the regulations that govern services in the rest of Victoria.

“It is much better to have the church doors open again and the clergy can begin to minister to the needs of the parish despite the still limited numbers,” Rev Evmenios told Neos Kosmos.

“For the people and for the clergy the last weekend was very emotional. We have been used to looking at the livestream or at a camera (during a service) and it was very emotional to look into the eyes of our parishioners again.

“We are looking at provisions to have a second Sunday service in churches where a second priest will be available to do so. We also looking at holding evening services,” he said.

There were plans also to continue livestreaming services particularly for the big feasts and celebrations.

“We may also livestream for the sick and the elderly – especially those who cannot come to church, so we can still minister to them.

In that sense he said, COVID-19 had provided an opportunity to reach out through electronic media.

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“Good things have come from the negative. We were very quick to find other means during lockdown to continue to connect with parishioners, as were the faithful to respond” Rev Evmenios said.

He said parish fellowships and groups have continued to operate through online platforms such as Zoom.

Thanks to the lockdown measures of the past months, everyone had rescheduled their marriages, and baptisms but there were signs that people were reconsidering when to go ahead again.

Rev Emmanuel Lykopantis of St Demetrios in Ascot Vale and Moonee Ponds, said that the bookings for baptisms were slowly picking up but most were waiting for the regulations to allow for far more people to attend church services. He said to date no weddings had been booked.

“All are waiting for rules to allow more people to gather not just 10 or 20 people at a time. Weddings are a big event in Greek culture,” said Rev Emmanuel.

“In the last few days we have been inundated with people coming to church. The response has been unbelievable.

“We are looking to conduct more services every day,” said Rev Emmanuel who added that while the opening of the churches was a good thing it was not fair that

places of worship were not allowed the same number of worshippers as pubs and restaurants were allowed customers in the premises.

“If the same rules were applied, we could safely accommodate up to 50 people in church at a time. We have cathedrals in the city centre that have seating for 2,000 people (under normal conditions) but who can only hold services for 20 people at a time.

He said the churches had been scrupulous in protecting the health of parishioners.

“We take temperature readings, we make sure everyone is wearing masks and there are hand sanitisers everywhere. There is no icon kissing. We have adapted,” said Rev Emmanuel.

“I cannot comprehend how places of worship have been neglected by the government. During lockdown we (the church) were doing welfare work delivering up to 500 boxes of food a fortnight to houses and the state government did not recognise this.

“At Agios Demetrious we normally with a suicide every three or four years. Under the Stage 4 lockdown we had three in a very small space of time. The Church is an essential part of certain people’s lives and that needs to be recognised. We are playing with peoples’ lives,” he said.

He said that the use of technology during the lockdown had helped but it was still very hard to do the job of a priest without contact with the parishioners.

“It was hard to execute our calling, our liturgical life. No matter what technology is used, you are still missing the physical interaction.

It was very good to for Channel 31 to broadcast live services or to view services on the internet, but people at home could not concentrate on the liturgy the way they would if they were in church. It was not the same essence.”

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