

Florida: Tarpon Springs celebrates Epiphany amid pandemic restrictions



The Epiphany celebration marking the baptism of Jesus Christ in the Jordan River went on as usual in Tarpon Springs, Florida, despite the many restrictions limiting the number of people watching and taking part.

Colten Sakadales, a 16-year-old who is a junior at Tarpon Springs High, was this year's cross dive winner. Amazingly, his brother Hunter won the cross last year.

The 115th annual celebration of the day marking Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River was officiated by Archbishop of the Americas Elpidophoros, who led the services inside St. Nicholas Cathedral before moving outside to bless the waters of Tarpon Springs and throw a blessed cross into the bayou.

A total of 55 young men were on hand to jump into the waters to find and retrieve the cross, as always — despite the fact that in a new twist this year, they had to swim out to boats before being allowed to jump in again to fish out the cross.

Time to get the cross!

The boys were only allowed two family members to watch them, and the police enforced a perimeter around the entire area so that no one other than those family members or ticketed parishioners would be congregating together around the bayou.

“The boys have dreamt about this all their lives because their dads have done it. Their grandfathers have done it. There’s so much tradition in retrieving the cross,” Johanna Kossifidis, spokesperson for St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral, told interviewers.

Normally, of course, the service and all the events afterward, which take place in the town famous for its many Greek sponge divers, are a gala, day-long affair.

Archbishop Elpidophoros posted a photo of Colten Sakadales after the event, saying “We bless these waters today, and we bless your lives with the Cross. You are all blessed by its sacred immersion today. Lift up the Cross in your hearts and your souls.

“As you dive into the depths to retrieve it, know that its holy power can lift you to your eternal salvation.”

St. Nicholas’ Greek Orthodox Cathedral was open to ticketed parishioners only. Up to 800 parishioners with tickets were given access to the Liturgy and festivities, according to Tarpon Springs police chief Robert Kochen.

The four-hour Liturgy which marks the end of the Christmas season was unfortunately only be able to be attended by 50 percent of its usual number of Epiphany parishioners.

The teenage divers, their family members, church officials and parishioners with tickets were the only people allowed to take part or watch the festivities this year.

Tarpon Springs Police Chief Robert Kochen told the local press “We don’t want a super-spreader event. We meet with the church officials all the time and I believe we have a good agreement that this will be a nice event in a really difficult time.”

A staple of Tarpon Springs’ winter events since 1906, it has in the past attracted more than 25,000 people to the historically Greek town.

The divers also had to wear a mask leading up to the time they dive into the water — and they were given new masks to don immediately after climbing out of the

bayou.

The ceremonial procession which leads up to the throwing of the cross by the Bishop or Archbishop — as well as the Glendi Celebration afterward — were of course canceled this year. There was also be a limited number of parishioners allowed inside St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral for the Epiphany service itself.

Watch videos from the 2021 Tarpon Springs Epiphany:

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