

Coronavirus: Morphou bishop refuses to pay fine



Morphou bishop Neophytos won't pay a fine for violating coronavirus-related decrees and, should the state decide to prosecute, he will defend himself in court, his lawyer said on Tuesday.

The cleric and 10 others were issued on-the-spot fines on Epiphany Day during a church service and a walk to a river for the Blessing of the Waters. At the time Covid measures meant church services should have been carried without anyone in the congregation.

The fines were for breaking the quarantine law in that they did not adhere to coronavirus-related restrictions and they did not wear a mask indoors.

The bishop's attorney, Nicos Clerides said his client refuses to pay the penalty precisely so that the case can end up in court.

Should the state decide to pursue and file criminal charges, their argument will be that the emergency decrees issued by virtue of the Quarantine Law are unlawful and unconstitutional.

Clerides argues that although the cabinet may delegate to a minister – in this case

the minister of health – the power to issue ordinances or decrees, these must be approved by parliament first before they acquire the force of law.

To date none of the coronavirus-related decrees have gone through parliament.

They are therefore null and void, Clerides says.

Speaking to the Cyprus Mail on Tuesday, the attorney conceded it was a technical or procedural argument.

Asked whether he'd still consider the decrees unlawful even if they did get the nod from parliament, he replied in the affirmative.

“Because they violate civil liberties – peaceful assembly, free movement, and the right to worship. And whereas these rights may not be unfettered in emergencies, any constraints on them must be proportional and not sweeping.”

Although the bishop's deadline for paying the fine has already expired, it's understood the state has yet to file charges.

The standard €300 fine relating to coronavirus decrees is payable in 15 days; if unpaid within those 15 days, it increases by one-and-half times. If the fine remains unpaid after 30 days, the case is filed in court.

Asked about the corollary of the bishop going to court and gaining a favourable judgment, Clerides it would signal that all coronavirus-related decrees are void.

Clerides is also defending a priest from Akaki facing charges for presiding over a church service in mid-December.

Regarding the case of the Morphou bishop, it remains to be seen whether the attorney-general's office will file charges or else quietly drop the case.

Some commentators speculate the state might opt for the latter so as to avoid the bad optics of prosecuting a cleric.

