

The Greek Orthodox Church of America responds to Covid-19

By Floriana Boardman

April 16, 2020



Father Vasileios Tsourlis has been calling every member of his 1,200 family parish to check-in since services went online last month. 84-year-old Fani Katsoudas was delighted after she received a check-in phone call last week.

"I have even learned how to work 'the Facebook' to watch my Church on Sundays or whenever there is service," Katsoudas said.

Katsoudas, a member of the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Charlotte, NC, has been using the many virtual activities Fr. Tsourlis has implemented to continue preaching the faith in this tough time. She participates in the nightly "Coffee with Fr. V" chats via Zoom, and watches Liturgy from the comfort of her home.

"The church might be physically closed to the public, but thanks to the technology the church is not closed, the church is everywhere now," Tsourlis said, "being in church does not mean only physically, but being in church mentally, and we can be in church everywhere in that kind of form."

With religion being a communal activity, faiths across the globe have had to deal with COVID-19's unprecedented isolation. But in a way, the separation is bringing people together more than they realize.

"As the shepherd of my flock, I have to worry about all my sheep, and they aren't with me now, so I have to find them," Tsourlis says, and with his calls, virtual chats, and liturgies, he is doing just that.

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidoforos of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America addressed all of his faithful in their first ever Virtual Town Hall meeting on Saturday, April 11th from New York. His first priority is protecting the people, and for him, listening to science is the way to do this.

"There is a general idea that faith is not compatible with science, this is not true. Science, and theology, and faith are not contradictory to each other... we should ask the doctors about how to deal with this."



This means taking unprecedented restrictions on things like communion and other sacraments that are celebrated face-to-face. All Greek Orthodox Churches in America are implementing a strict "closed-doors" policy with services broadcasted online, celebrated only with the participation of the priest, chanter, and the acolyte. While there are few Christian churches of other denominations offering drive-thru communion, all Orthodox Churches are instructed not to follow this approach.

"We believe that what we receive during the Eucharist is truly the blood and the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, it is not just bread and wine, as such, the body and the blood does not transmit any disease or any virus," Elpidoforos said. "But the way we distribute the communion, the instruments can transmit the disease and the virus, so we have to distinguish these two things."

According to Elpidoforos, the tradition of a communal cup and spoon used for communion during liturgies is not doctrine of the Orthodox Church. While this practice cannot change alone within the United States, it is a tradition that can adjust. He does not wish for this tradition to change, but if it is a necessary precaution to take, there could be another method for communion in the future.

"I can't imagine any other way because I am raised this way, and I would personally have difficulty changing any other way" Elpidoforos said. "But I have to be honest and say that it is not a doctrine, it is a custom, a tradition, a holy tradition, but it can change. These are the parts of the tradition that can be renewed."

Like every institution in the world right now, the Orthodox Church is not immune to the economic stress of the down turning economy. The Archdiocese has provided livestreaming toolboxes for local parishes to generate donations, such as virtual candle lighting. Additionally, the Archdiocese has decreased the income of the bishops, and if necessary, they will lower it more.

However, according to Elpidoforos, this economic stress will not stop the construction and the opening next year of the St. Nicholas Shrine at the World Trade Center. The small Greek Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas, the only place of worship that fell on 9/11, is slowly being rebuilt. While there have been many challenges with the church's construction, COVID-19 will hopefully not be one of them. The priority of the Orthodox Church is to keep their people safe, and so construction on-site is not being done, but many of the elements to the church are still being produced, such as the icons.

While closing doors of Orthodox Churches around the globe is unprecedented, Tsourlis has not lost hope and his parishioners have not either. In fact, he sees a resurgence of faith.

"People now, seeing what church provides them, have come closer to the faith than they were before the Coronavirus," Tsourlis said. "We must never forget that the church is everywhere. We are never alone, we are never away from the church, we are always in church, because we the people are the church."

Floriana Boardman majors in Political Science at Fordham University.

The article was published on "CBS News Internship Program" Facebook page
https://www.facebook.com/cbsnewsinternships/posts/2412537472302008?_tn=K-R