

Pascha during Pandemic

Pascha 2020 was celebrated on April 19, in many countries, under a variety of restrictions imposed by ecclesiastic or secular authorities. Most governments around the world started to impose lock-down or restrictive measures in early to mid-March. On March 18, the Patriarchate of Constantinople announced the cancellation of all liturgical services in all its jurisdictions, except the monasteries. The monks continued to serve, but without lay visitors.¹ Subsequently, parishes in North America were allowed to conduct services with only clergy present. The initial prohibition intended to expire by end of March, but it was extended so that the quarantine was left in place during the Holy Week and the Pascha.² Mount Athos had to stop receiving visitors throughout the lockdown in Greece, but the quarantine that was announced on March 19 did not keep the coronavirus away from the monastic republic: four monks tested positive after returning from the United Kingdom. The Mount Athos lockdown was supposed to end on April 20, but it was subsequently extended through May.³

The state of Israel was under a strict lock-down and quarantine in April, with all religious gatherings suspended. The Church of the Holy Resurrection was also closed – the first time since 1349, when the Black Death ravaged the region. However, Israeli authorities did allow Patriarchate of Jerusalem to receive Holy Fire on Great Saturday, albeit without pilgrims attending the event in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, attended by a couple of clergymen, a sole chanter, representatives of the Oriental churches and few Israeli policeman, emerged from the Edicule with Holy Fire around 2 pm on Saturday,

¹ “Κορωνοϊός: Ο Βαρθολομαίος σταματά θρησκευτικές ιερουργίες, εκδηλώσεις και τελετές μέχρι τέλους Μαρτίου,” *Paraskhnio*, March 18 2020 <paraskhnio.gr/κορωνοϊός-ο-βαρθολομαίος-σταματά-θρη/>

² “Вселенский Патриарх призвал верующих на Пасху оставаться дома,” *Ukrinform*, April 12 2020 <<https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-society/3003865-vselskij-patriarh-prizval-veruusih-napashu-ostavatsa-doma.html>>

³ “Mount Athos extends coronavirus shutdown,” *Greek City Times*, May 1 2020 <<https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/05/01/mount-athos-extends-coronavirus-shutdown/>>

and distribute it among those present. All present were wearing masks except Patriarch. From the Church of the Holy Sepulcher fire was transported by motorcade to Ben Gurion Airport, where the delegations from Greece, Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Cyprus, Romania, Moldova, Belarus, Poland and Kazakhstan were waiting to receive it.⁴

In Athens, Holy Fire was received in the airport by the local bishop, deputy foreign minister, an honor guard and a 15-member military band. Greek authorities had introduced very strict lockdown measures in March, with all religious services suspended. The Church of Greece decided to keep holy fire on the premises of the parish of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in Athens instead of distributing it to Greek parishes as usual.⁵ Closing of the parishes and suspending Lenten and Paschal services in Greece was not a popular move, much criticized by the clergy and the faithful, but the Greek government persisted enforcing strict curfew measures by ordering the church doors to be closed and by cracking down on violators.⁶

The lock-down and quarantine measures were no less strict in Georgia, but the Church of Georgia has kept its doors open. In anticipation of mass gatherings during the Holy Week and Pascha, Georgian authorities introduced a strict curfew from 9 pm to 6 am, banning all non-emergency movement. This meant that those who intended to attend the Paschal service had to arrive for service before 9 pm and remain in the church or in a church yard until 6 am. Country's main cathedrals and few other churches remained open for the Paschal night with a limited number

⁴ Daniel Estrin, "Holy Fire Ceremony to Mark Orthodox Easter Held in Near-Empty Jerusalem Church," NPR, April 18 2020 <<https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/18/837883795/holy-fire-ceremony-to-mark-orthodox-easter-held-in-near-empty-jerusalem-church>>

⁵ "Holy Light arrives, to stay confined," *Ekathimerini*, April 18 2020 <<https://www.ekathimerini.com/251838/article/ekathimerini/news/holy-light-arrives-to-stay-confined>>

⁶ "Pascha in Greece in the Time of Coronavirus (Photos)," *The National Herald*, April 20 2020 <https://www.thenationalherald.com/archive_coronavirus/arthro/pascha_in_greece_in_the_time_of_coronavirus_photos-265686/>

of people attending.⁷ Those who went self-selected by only young and healthy parishioners attending services. The Church in Georgia remained open throughout the coronavirus lockdown, and this gave much food for criticism to those who oppose the church. However, toward the end of the COVID-19 lockdown, authorities in Georgia acknowledged that the church activities and the Paschal celebrations had no impact whatsoever on the spread of the virus.⁸

Both Greece and Georgia have handled the spread of the coronavirus successfully. Both countries implemented necessary public health measures, Georgia acting as early as mid-January. In Greece, with the population about 10.8 million, by end of June 2020, there were 3,390 confirmed cases with 191 deaths. In Georgia, with the population of about 3.8 million, by end of June there were 926 confirmed cases with 15 deaths.⁹ Georgia, with its churches remaining open during the spring 2020 wave of pandemic, suffered the fewest deaths in Europe per million population.¹⁰

The church remained initially open in Russia while the country was suffering mass coronavirus infection and significant death rates. Subsequently, in many Russian cities, local bishops closed the parishes and invited the faithful to attend Paschal services online. For instance, the Kazan cathedral in St. Petersburg celebrated Pascha without parishioners. In remote cities, rural areas, and monasteries parishioners were allowed to attend, in some cases requiring face coverings and social distancing.¹¹ Patriarch of Russia Cyril celebrated Pascha in the

⁷ „ადდგომის დღესასწაული საქართველოში [ფოტო],“ პირველი არხი, April 19 2020 <<https://1tv.ge/news/aghdgomis-dghesaswauli-saqartveloshi-foto/>>

⁸ „არავითარი მატება რელიგიურ დღესასწაულებთან დაკავშირებული არ აღინიშნება“ -- თენგიზ ცერცვაძე,“ აჭარის ტელევიზია, May 4 2020 <<http://ajaratv.ge/article/58904?fbclid=IwAR1OZrCSSypepAFw-yu5tzNjPeheug3YRPN0Kib9aUoygxwXKdQ4FpMkt6g>>

⁹ “COVID-19 Dashboard,” Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, June 30 2020 <<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Как в России праздновали Пасху во время пандемии коронавируса. Фотографии,” Meduza, April 19 2020 <<https://meduza.io/feature/2020/04/19/kak-v-rossii-prazdnovali-pashu-vo-vremya-pandemii-koronavirusa-fotografii>>

Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow without parishioners, accompanied by a handful of clergy and journalists. Overall, in Moscow the parishes were closed according to the recommendation by the city government, but at least one remained open for a select number of visitors.¹² At least 50 priests in Moscow were infected with the virus – around 4% of the priests in the city.¹³

In Ukraine, the local church was under lockdown since March following the Ecumenical Patriarch's directive. The Paschal service was celebrated with the clergy and very few choir members only, and in some cases, with online streaming.¹⁴ The archdiocese of the Russian church in Ukraine followed the guidelines from Moscow. For the celebration of Pascha, maximum 10 people allowed inside the church building, including the clergy and members of the choir. Parishioners were allowed to enter the church building after the service – only two people at once in larger cathedrals, and one person at a time in smaller churches.¹⁵ Some of those tested positive with the coronavirus were monks at Kyiv's Pechersk Lavra, where more than 100 were infected with 3 reported deaths.¹⁶

The church in Bulgaria remained open during the pandemic lockdown, but the Holy Synod called on the faithful to remain home. On March 30, the Bulgarian Holy Synod issued most detailed guidelines to the clergy and the faithful, including directions on proper disinfection procedures. Both the clergy and the faithful were told to wear facemasks and to observe social distancing. The church allowed the sacraments of baptism and holy matrimony as usual but only with a limited

¹² “«Пир веры» во время чумы,” *Novaya gazeta*, April 19 2020
<<https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/04/19/84990-pir-very-vo-vremya-chumy>>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Пасха 2020 в Украине в карантин: какие традиции и что теперь строго запрещено делать,” *Kherson online*, April 19 2020 <<https://khersonline.net/lenta/158562-pasha-2020-v-ukraine-v-karantin-kakie-tradicii-i-cto-teper-strogo-zaprescheno-delat.html>>

¹⁵ “Карантин на Пасху ужесточат: украинцев ждут серьезные запреты,” РБК-Украина, April 17 2020 <<https://www.rbc.ua/rus/stylar/pasha-ukraine-2020-uzhestochat-karantin-prazdniki-1587116030.html>>

¹⁶ “Churches mostly empty for Orthodox Easter due to virus rules,” ABC News, April 19 2020
<<https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/churches-empty-orthodox-easter-due-virus-rules-70231702>>

number of attendees. The services for the deceased were to be done outdoors, in or around cemeteries. Clergy with COVID-19-like symptoms were directed to stop serving immediately.¹⁷ Still, the Bulgarian church had to celebrate Pascha either with a limited number of faithful or behind the closed doors due to the curfew imposed by the national government.

In the beginning of the Holy Week, the Holy Synod of the church in Serbia addressed the government of Serbia to relax the curfew for the people who wanted to attend the Pascha liturgy on the Eastern Sunday. The communique called on suspending the curfew from 5 am to 10 am so that those not in quarantine or self-isolation could participate in the Paschal liturgy.¹⁸ The church opponents in Serbia used this communique to heavily criticize the Holy Synod. On April 14, Patriarch of Serbia Irinej held a telephone conversation with the president of the republic, Aleksandar Vucic, who denied the March 30 request by the Holy Synod to relax the curfew, and thanked the church for its support in the fight against the coronavirus.¹⁹ Instead of lifting the curfew, the government of Serbia imposed a harsher curfew spanning uninterrupted for 84 hours from Friday afternoon to Tuesday morning.²⁰ As a result, Patriarch Irinej celebrated the Paschal liturgy in the crypt of Saint Sava cathedral on Vracar attended by two priests, two protodeacons, two subdeacons, and about three dozen faithful.

The Patriarchate of Alexandria celebrated the Holy Week and Easter services behind the closed doors. Patriarch Theodore complied with a request by the Egyptian government, which tried its best to stop the spread of the

¹⁷ “Обръщение на Св. Синод на БПЦ-БП след среща с представители на правителството и кризисния щаб,” Българската православна църква, March 30 2020 <<https://bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=318139>>

¹⁸ “Communique of the Holy Synod of Bishops,” Serbian Orthodox Church, March 30 2020 <http://www.spc.rs/eng/communique_holy_synod_bishops_2>

¹⁹ “Telephone conversation between the Serbian President and the Serbian Patriarch,” Serbian Orthodox Church, April 16 2020 <http://www.spc.rs/eng/telephone_conversation_between_serbian_president_and_serbian_patriarch>

²⁰ “Churches mostly empty for Orthodox Easter due to virus rules.”

coronavirus.²¹ The Coptic church likewise closed its services for the duration of the lockdown. The Patriarch of Alexandria celebrated Pascha with two clergymen and church staff at the Cathedral of the Annunciation of the Theotokos in Alexandria.²² The Egyptian government allowed the houses of worship to reopen on June 27, but some parishes in Alexandria and Cairo decided to remain closed until mid-July amid the rising infection levels. The Church of Sinai – St. Catherin’s Monastery – also stopped receiving visitors, although life within the monastery continued as before. Besides COVID-19, the Church of Sinai in early spring was threatened with terrorist activities in the region. Governments of Egypt and South Sinai deployed additional security measures to protect the monastery and its surrounding areas.²³

The Patriarchate of Antioch in Syria, on March 16, adopted “temporary and exceptional measures” to counter the coronavirus. The lock-down measures were set to expire on April 4, but it was subsequently extended through April.²⁴ As a result, the Holy Week and Paschal services were celebrated behind the closed doors.²⁵

In Romania, the Paschal services were held without the participation of the faithful. The lay people were banned from attending church services by a government order of state of emergency, which lasted in Romania until mid-May. The ban remained in place despite petitions by some very influential religious

²¹ “Holy Week and Easter services behind closed doors at the Patriarchate of Alexandria,” *Orthodox Times*, April 3 2020 <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/holy-week-and-easter-services-behind-closed-doors-at-the-patriarchate-of-alexandria/>>

²² “Patriarch of Alexandria: Our hearts, full of hope, cry out, Christ is risen from the dead,” *Orthodox Times*, April 19 2020 <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarch-of-alexandria-our-hearts-full-of-hope-cry-out-christ-is-risen-from-the-dead/>>

²³ “Archbishop of Mount Sinai: We have to be aware of measures and not be dissatisfied,” *Orthodox Times*, April 12 2020 <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/archbishop-of-mount-sinai-we-have-to-be-aware-of-measures-and-not-be-dissatisfied/>>

²⁴ “Patriarchate of Antioch: Temporary and exceptional measures until April 4th,” *Orthodox Times*, March 16 2020 <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarchate-of-antioch-temporary-and-exceptional-measures-until-april-4th/>>

²⁵ “Patriarchate of Antioch: Holy Week services behind closed doors, without presence of believers,” *Orthodox Times*, April 6 2020 <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/patriarchate-of-antioch-holy-week-services-held-behind-closed-doors-without-the-participation-of-believers/>>

figures in Romania.²⁶ Traditional Romanian Easter fares and other public celebrations were also cancelled. The Ministry of Interior of Romania announced before Pascha that the police would help distribute the Holy Fire from Jerusalem. The traditional Romanian Paste – the bread blessed on the Great and Holy Thursday – was likewise was to be distributed directly to faithful.²⁷ Understandably, this way of distribution the gifts of Easter could not have reached many people. To remedy that shortcoming, the Archdiocese of Tomis in southeast Romania announced in May that it would celebrate the Easter liturgy once again on the night of May 26 to May 27, and called on the faithful to attend and receive the Holy Fire.²⁸ In Moldavia, the church was closed to the faithful, with the exception of the monasteries where the monastics were allowed to attend. Clergy and church workers celebrated Pascha on their own, and organized the blessing of the Paschal baskets and paschal bread as separate events staged outdoors.²⁹

On May 4, the Church of Cyprus opened its doors for “individual prayers” by allowing up to 10 people to enter at any one time. Liturgies resumed by early June after the lockdown that commenced on March 24.³⁰ Following the Palm Sunday, a police investigation was launched following reports that Metropolitan of Morphou celebrated the Divine Liturgy attended by faithful. After the police interrupted the Liturgy, Metropolitan complained that “the rights of the faithful

²⁶ “Serbian, Romanian Priests Ask for Waiver to Hold Easter Masses,” *Balkan Insight*, April 13 2020 <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/13/serbian-romanian-priests-ask-for-waiver-to-hold-easter-masses/>>

²⁷ “Romanian Police will help the Orthodox Church pass the Holy Light to believers amid COVID-19 restrictions,” *Romania Insider*, April 14 2020 <<https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-coronavirus-easter-holy-light-orthodox-church>>

²⁸ “Southern Romania: Archdiocese of Tomis to redo Easter service next week,” *Romania Insider*, May 21 2020 <<https://www.romania-insider.com/tomis-church-redo-easter-service>>

²⁹ “Как в Молдове будут освящать пасхальные куличи и яйца при режиме ЧП. Рекомендации митрополии,” *Газета “СП”*, April 11 2020 <<https://esp.md/sobytiya/2020/04/11/kak-v-moldove-budut-osvyashchat-pashalnye-kulich-i-yayca-pri-rezhime-chp>>

³⁰ “Churches to open their doors on 4 May in Cyprus,” *Orthodox Times*, May 2 2020 <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/churches-to-open-their-doors-on-4-may-in-cyprus/>>

[were] being violated.”³¹ In Albania, the police harassed villagers who erected a cross for a local monastery during the lockdown.³² Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana first announced on March 12 that all church services except Sunday Liturgies were cancelled, and in another decision on March 17 he announced that the Liturgies were to be held behind the closed doors as well for the duration of the national lockdown, which stretched beyond Pascha.³³

In Poland, national authorities started implementing graduate lockdown type measures in March 10. During the initial phase, church gatherings were not greatly restricted, but things changed on March 20, when the Polish government officially declared an epidemic in the country.³⁴ The declaration restricted church activities to no more than 5 people and a celebrant. On March 31, the restrictions on people’s movements were tightened, but it was also suggested that larger church gatherings would be allowed from April 12; however, this changed on April 9, when government announced that larger church gatherings would not be allowed through April.³⁵ This meant that the Orthodox Church in Poland celebrated Pascha largely without faithful, but clergy did manage to organize the blessing of paschal baskets.

³¹ “The Rights of the Faithful Are being Violated,” Cypriot Metropolitan of Morphou Says after Police Interrupt Liturgy,” *Orthodox Christianity*, April 13 2020
<<https://orthochristian.com/130240.html>>

³² “Albanian anti-terror squad terrorise Greek villagers for installing a crucifix at their monastery ahead of Easter,” *Greek City Times*, April 6 2020
<<https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/04/06/albanian-anti-terror-squad-terrorise-greek-villagers-for-installing-a-crucifix-at-their-monastery-ahead-of-easter/>>

³³ “Archbishop Anastasios: We must increase confidence in the fact that He will not abandon us in our trial,” *Orthodox Times*, March 28 2020 <<https://orthodoxtimes.com/archbishop-anastasios-we-must-increase-confidence-in-the-fact-that-he-will-not-abandon-us-in-our-trial/>>

³⁴ “Koronawirus w Polsce. Ponad 300 nowych zakażeń,” *Newsweek Polska*, June 21 2020
<<https://www.newsweek.pl/wiedza/zdrowie/koronawirus-w-polsce-3-lipca-ile-jest-zakazen-koronawirusem/xr1qgc9>>

³⁵ “Obowiązek zasłaniania ust i nosa już wkrótce, a zasady bezpieczeństwa na dłużej,” *Government of Poland*, April 9 2020
<<https://archive.vn/20200409155616/https://www.gov.pl/web/koronawirus/zasady-na-dluzej>>

The national governments of the Czech Republic and Slovakia pursued similar policies. Prague declared a nationwide quarantine on March 16. Bratislava declared the state of emergency 4 days earlier with all non-emergency venues closed and mass activities cancelled. Slovakia made it compulsory to wear face masks in all public locations on March 18, the Czech Republic followed the suit on March 18. On March 15, the official Bratislava threatened to impose sanctions on the Orthodox Church if it continued services.³⁶ Slovakia imposed restrictions on freedom of movement from April 8 to 14 – essentially during the celebration of Easter by Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.³⁷ The Czech Republic started imposing restrictions on public gatherings from March 10, and from March 23 to April 27, when the state of emergency ended, no more than 2 people were allowed to meet in a public gathering, with the exception of funerals, and gatherings of family members, provided social distancing was observed. Further, Prague imposed a national curfew from March 15 to April 24.³⁸ Church services were allowed to take place provided no more than 15 people attended, wore face masks and observed social distancing. Churches in both the Czech Republic and Slovakia remained open for individual prayer and counselling. The early measures introduced in both countries, including the face mask requirements, allowed the Church in the Czech Lands and Slovakia to remain at least partially open.

As it is its custom, the Orthodox Church of Finland celebrated Pascha on the same day with the Roman Catholics and Protestants, which in 2020 was April 12. The government of Finland declared a nation-wide emergency on March 15, and

³⁶ “Orthodox Church in Slovakia will be sanctioned if it continues to hold services amidst coronavirus fears—Prime Minister,” *Orthodoxie.com*, March 15 2020 <<https://orthodoxie.com/en/orthodox-church-in-slovakia-will-be-sanctioned-if-it-continues-to-hold-services-amidst-coronavirus-fears-prime-minister/>>

³⁷ “Vláda schválila zákaz vychádzania cez Veľkú noc, zakázala aj zhromažďovanie ľudí, ktorí nežijú v jednej domácnosti,” *Dennikn*, April 6 2020 <<https://dennikn.sk/1842513/vlada-schvalila-zakaz-vychadzania-cez-velku-noc-zakazala-aj-zhromazdovanie-ludi-ktori-neziju-v-jednej-domacnosti>>

³⁸ “Na pomoc všem, kteří přišli kvůli koronaviru o příjem, uvolníme až bilion korun, řekl v projevu Babiš,” *Hospodářské Noviny*, April 8 2020 <<https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66747930-stav-nouze-potrva-do-kvetna>>

banned all public gatherings of more than 10 people.³⁹ Public places like schools, restaurants and bars were closed, there was no decree specifically closing the churches; however, the government did recommend the churches to suspend activities.⁴⁰ The travel restrictions primarily applied to travel outside the country, and for a period of time one Finnish province was quarantined. The emergency measures started to relax in early May, and the decree was completely lifted on June 15.⁴¹

Japan has not had a nation-wide lockdown due to the novel coronavirus. It was the first country; however, to close its schools for a period of time. The Japanese government did declare a state of emergency in mid-April, but did not impose a nation-wide lockdown or other restrictive measures – such enforcements in Japan are left to the country’s prefectures.⁴² In mid-May, the Japanese government lifted the state of emergency in 39 out of 47 prefectures, and urged people to make a transition gradually.⁴³ During the lockdown, the Japanese government did not issue any specific restrictive orders for the churches or the places of worship, but did make a general request for people “to reduce contact with others by at least 70 percent and up to 80 percent.”⁴⁴ Essentially, the church of Japan was left to regulate itself, adopting the guidelines put in place by the local prefectures.

³⁹ “Finland in confinement,” *Foreigner. Fi*, March 17 2020
<<https://www.foreigner.fi/articulo/coronavirus/finland-in-confinement/20200317151854004837.html>>

⁴⁰ “Finland declares state of emergency over coronavirus epidemic,” *Foreigner. Fi*, March 16 2020
<<https://www.foreigner.fi/articulo/coronavirus/finland-armored-against-coronavirus/20200316184156004828.html>>

⁴¹ “Finland reopening with restrictions,” *Foreigner. Fi*, June 1 2020
<<https://www.foreigner.fi/articulo/coronavirus/finland-reopening/20200601112602006173.html>>

⁴² “Japan declares nationwide state of emergency amid virus spread,” *Kyodo News*, April 16 2020
<<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/04/da404143318b-urgent-japan-looks-to-expand-areas-covered-by-virus-emergency-declaration.html>>

⁴³ “Japan to lift coronavirus state of emergency in 39 prefectures,” *The Japan Times*, May 14 2020
<<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/14/national/japan-coronavirus-emergency-39-prefectures/>>

⁴⁴ “Japan declares nationwide state of emergency amid virus spread,” *Kyodo News*, April 16 2020.

Even though Kazakhstan is a Muslim-majority country, around 26 percent of its 19 million population is Christian, with the vast majority of them part of the Metropolis of Kazakhstan, a jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Moscow. The nine diocese of the church in Kazakhstan celebrated Pascha behind the closed doors.⁴⁵ The church in Uzbekistan, the main component of the Central Asian Metropolis of the Patriarchate of Moscow, also celebrated Pascha behind the closed doors.⁴⁶ The same was true for the other countries of Central Asia, except Turkmenistan. The authoritarian leader of Turkmenistan, President Berdimuhamedov, banned the word “coronavirus” and ordered it removed from all circulation. Turkmenistan ranks below North Korea in the World Press Freedom Index, and it is unknown so far what measures the country has undertaken to counter the spread of COVID-19, besides being one of the first countries in the world to close national borders.⁴⁷

One predominantly Orthodox country that did not impose any restrictions on the church during the 2020 phase of the pandemic was Belarus – an exarchate of the Patriarchate of Moscow. Remarkably, President of Belarus, Aliaksandr Lukashenka, rejected any sort of lockdown or quarantine measure to fight COVID-19, and called the reaction elsewhere to the novel coronavirus a “psychosis.”⁴⁸ Instead of restricting the church attendance, he called the faithful to go to the church and to celebrate Pascha.⁴⁹ Lukashenka, who has served as Belarus’ only post-Soviet president, serving in this capacity since 1994, visited a rural church on Pascha as he normally visits remote or rural parishes on major holidays. When

⁴⁵ “Как пройдет Пасха в условиях карантина,” KazInform, April 18 2020 <[inform.kz
https://www.inform.kz/ru/kak-proydet-pasha-v-usloviyah-karantina_a3639712](https://www.inform.kz/ru/kak-proydet-pasha-v-usloviyah-karantina_a3639712)>

⁴⁶ “Православные христиане Узбекистана встречают Пасху,” kun.uz, April 19 2020 <<https://kun.uz/ru/news/2020/04/19/pravoslavnyye-xristiane-uzbekistana-vstrechayut-pasxu>>

⁴⁷ “Turkmenistan bans the word 'coronavirus': report,” ABC News, April 1 2020 <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/turkmenistan-bans-word-coronavirus-report/story?id=69914073>>

⁴⁸ “Psychosis? Lukashenka Shrugs, Opponents Are Appalled by Lack Of COVID-19 Measures In Belarus,” RFE-RL, March 24 2020 <<https://www.rferl.org/a/psychosis-lukashenka-shrugs-opponents-are-appalled-by-lack-of-covid-19-measures-in-belarus/30506812.html>>

⁴⁹ “Лукашенко призвал не бояться коронавируса и идти в храм на Пасху,” Профиль, April 19 2020 <<https://profile.ru/news/abroad/lukashenko-prizval-ne-boyatsya-koronavirusa-i-idi-v-xram-na-pasxu-287676/>>

speaking with local monastics and parishioners, Lukashenka criticized those national leaders who had, in his words, closed “the road to the church.”⁵⁰ It has been Mr. Lukashenka’s official position since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic that the novel coronavirus is nothing more than yet another virus that people have to deal with every year.

In North America, the local church, the Orthodox Church in America (OCA) stopped services in mid-March. During the Lenten and Paschal seasons, few liturgies were streamed online. All other jurisdictions active in North America followed their own church guidelines from around the world, and most importantly, the restrictions established for them by state governments. During the Paschal celebrations, seven US states had not issued lockdown or stay-at-home orders: Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming.⁵¹ In mid-March, all Canadian provinces and territories declared the state of emergency, closed schools, restaurants, and bars, and banned public gathering over certain number of people, ranging from over 5 people in Atlantic provinces to over 50 in Quebec and British Columbia (from the beginning, Nunavut banned all public gatherings), and changed the restrictions through the state of emergency.⁵² A stay-at-home order was not issued by any Canadian jurisdiction. At least some Orthodox parishes located in the open or partially open US states and Canadian provinces could have had the church doors open for the faithful on the Easter night. On April 3 2020, the Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA issued a statement “concerning Holy Week and Pascha (Easter).” In this statement, the members of the executive committee communicated their consensus “concerning Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Pascha (Easter),” and strongly encouraged all Bishops “to implement the following recommendations:”

⁵⁰ “Лукашенко сходил в храм: "Вирусы переживаем каждый год",” Украинская правда, April 19 2020 <<https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2020/04/19/7248565/>>

⁵¹ “7 governors still haven't issued stay-at-home orders. Here's why,” CNN, April 13 2020 <<https://www.cnn.com/2020/04/13/politics/asa-hutchison-arkansas-coronavirus/index.html>>

⁵² “Coronavirus: Quebec government bans public gatherings of all sizes,” Global News, March 22 2020 <<https://globalnews.ca/news/6715020/coronavirus-quebec-public-gathering-ban/>>

1. Services, celebrated by a maximum of five people consisting of a Priest, a Deacon, Chantor(s), and/ or Server(s), continue in the churches and may be streamed online for the faithful to pray from their homes.
2. None of the traditional material offerings are to be distributed to the faithful in any way, including palms and/or pussy willows, flowers, candles, and eggs, etc.
3. Spiritual guidance may be heard over the phone, but the implementation of the Sacrament of Confession and Prayer of Absolution remains at the discretion of the local Bishop.⁵³

The executive committee also acknowledged that “some Bishops might implement more stringent practices out of love and concern for their flock,” and warned that “less stringent approached will put the Faithful and their Clergy at high risk.”⁵⁴

The Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and Pascha of 2020 came and went, but COVID-19 has remained, at least for the rest of 2020. The Orthodox Churches implemented a variety of measures during Easter celebrations, according to the guidelines established by local political authorities, but there is no evidence that opening or closing of the churches had any impact whatsoever on the progression of virus. Some countries that were under strict lockdown measures during spring, have experienced higher infection rates after gradually reopening their economies in summer. A good example of this is the State of Israel.⁵⁵ In some countries, for instance, Russia, closing down the churches during the Paschal season did not stop the spread of virus, in fact, the infection rates increased dramatically after mid-April.⁵⁶ Georgia provides a different example of a country successfully tackling

⁵³ “Statement of the ACOB-USA Executive Committee Concerning Holy Week and Pascha (Easter),” Assembly of Canonical Orthodox Bishops of the USA, April 3 2020
<<http://www.assemblyofbishops.org/news/2020/pascha-2020>>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ “Israel had coronavirus firmly in its grasp, only to see it slip away,” CNN, July 8 2020
<<https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/08/middleeast/israel-coronavirus-second-wave-netanyahu-intl/index.html>>

⁵⁶ “Total Coronavirus Cases in Russia,” worldometer, July 9 2020
<<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/russia/>>

COVID-19 without closing the church – the country suffered fewer than 1,000 cases of infections since the outbreak with 15 deaths – the lowest mortality rate in Europe per million of population, an one of the lowest mortality rate among those infected.⁵⁷ Belarus represents yet another interesting example: the official Minsk imposed no official lockdown or stay-at-home orders, and did not restrict church activities at all. As of mid-July 2020, the country has confirmed more than 64,000 infected with about 450 deaths.⁵⁸ In comparison, among European countries of similar size population (about 10 million people) that affected lockdowns or stay-at-home orders, Austria suffered more than 18,000 infections with more than 700 deaths, Switzerland – almost 33 thousand cases with almost 2,000 deaths, Portugal – more than 45 thousand cases with more than 1,600 deaths.⁵⁹ Finally, Japan has been an example of a major country with densely populated large urban areas not imposing blanket nation-wide lockdowns or other draconian measures; instead, Japanese authorities have concentrated on tackling individual clusters of infection and eradicating mega-clusters. As a result, as of mid-July 2020, a country of 130 million people has suffered about 20 thousand cases with about 1,000 deaths. In comparison, the Russian Federation, a scarcely populated country with a marginally larger population, has suffered more than 700 thousand cases with more than 11,000 deaths.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ “Georgia Overview,” CoronaTracker, July 9 2020
<<https://www.coronatracker.com/country/georgia/>>

⁵⁸ “COVID-19 Dashboard,” Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, July 8 2020.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.