

COVID-19 AND THE CHURCHES: BULGARIA

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The Bulgarian case is different, and I will try to present it to you briefly.

For two months - from mid-March to mid-May - the Bulgarian parliament imposed a state of emergency at the proposal of the government. The measures were introduced relatively early, and this allowed the situation to be managed without extreme restrictions. It is important to note that the Bulgarian government did not dare to propose the closure of churches and other places of worship. This decision caused some public tension during the Easter celebrations, but as there was no significant increase in the number of infected people, the government managed to keep its word.

Nevertheless, most of the Protestant churches and the Catholic Church in Bulgaria have decided to go online during the state of emergency. The Orthodox Church continued its public worship in compliance with required anti-epidemic measures. There was some tension over the practice of sharing the sacrament with a common spoon, but the Church was reluctant to make changes in this regard. Here, too, the state refused (and rightly so) to interfere in the liturgical practice of the Orthodox Church.

So, in Bulgaria, we had a unique situation - the government did not close the churches. Still, some of them decided to suspend their public worship having in mind their responsibility for the life and health of their members and members of the broader society. The government did not seem to notice the efforts of these minority churches to contribute to overcoming the crisis. If, however, any of these churches continued to hold public worship services, even in the open air and in compliance with all measures, the state allowed itself to use time to time a strong hand, such as imposing fines and initiating criminal proceedings. Fortunately, these were only isolated cases, and they ended unfavourably for the state.

Currently, all churches and religious communities can hold their services indoors in compliance with anti-epidemic measures - physical distance, wearing masks, and disinfection. The state seeks to exercise tighter control after the increase in the number of infected as a result of the rapid liberalization of the measures imposed. Regional health inspectorates are likely to be given the right to impose additional anti-epidemic rules if the situation requires so. It is not possible to say at this stage whether these measures could affect the liturgical life of churches and other religious communities. But given the government's position so far, religious gatherings would be the last forbidden events if the epidemic situation changes unfavourably. And for sure, the attention of the government will be focused mainly on the minority churches and religious communities.

In the Bulgarian case, the churches had two different reactions. Most of the minority churches themselves have decided to impose restrictions on their worship life as a sign of solidarity with the government's and society's efforts to deal with the pandemic. In this emergency, the life and health of the other were placed above the freedom of religion.

The Orthodox Church has chosen a different approach. No emergency or extraordinary situation can be a reason to suspend public worship. The Church is called to give hope not only to its members but to society as a whole. So, in this case, there is no clash or competition of rights, but fidelity to the vocation that the Church has received from Christ himself.

I do not intend to conclude which of the two approaches is the right one. A good balance between them is probably the best and at the same time, the most difficult answer that the churches could give in such a situation.