

RELIGION, LAW AND COVID-19 EMERGENCY

Coronavirus emergency in the Monastic Autonomous Republic of Mount Athos. Contagion without Covid-19

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In the Aegean Sea, precisely in the Chalkidiki peninsula, seats the **Monastic Autonomous Republic of Mount Athos**. It became a center of organized monastic life in monasteries in the year 963, and now it is composed by twenty monasteries and some villages and houses that depend on them. About 2.000 Orthodox monks of different traditions live there playing introspection and prayer.

The monasteries are exempted from the authority of the local bishop and are placed directly under the responsibility of the Ecumenical Patriarch. On the political and administrative level, it is the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs which manages, on behalf of the Hellenic Republic, questions relating to the peninsula, which is a Greek territory, but where different laws apply,

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compatible with the *Abaton*: that is the rule which defend the monastic strict enclosure. The access of «any female creature» is strictly forbidden, with two exceptions: hens (for eggs, used in cooking and for icons painting) and cats (to hunt rodents). Its legal status is protected by the Greek Constitution (art. 105), and ruled by the Charter of Holy Mountain, which was drawn up and voted by the Athonite monastic authorities in 1924, and afterwards ratified (with some amendments) by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and then definitely approved by the Greek Parliament on September 1926¹. The administrative power lies in self-administration operated by the Holy Community (Ierà Kinòtita, composed by twenty monks, each of whom represents one monastery) and the Ierà Epistasià, which comprises four monks drawn annually from four monasteries in rotation. The leader of the Ierà Epistasià is called the First (= Protos). Greece is responsible for safeguarding public order and security, assured by a (civil) Deputy Commander. Because a lot of provisions of the Monastic Republic law are opposite to the principles of the European Union (for example the clausura to women, the special license in order to visit the peninsula, the taxation and customs privileges etc.), its special status was included in the [Final Act of the Agreement concerning the accession of the Hellenic Republic in the European Economic Community](#) (1979), nowadays European Union, as well as in the [Schengen acquis on 1990](#), that both recognize the special status granted to the Monastic Republic, as guaranteed by the Greek Constitution, as justified exclusively on grounds of a spiritual and religious nature.

Despite the strict enclosure, the coronavirus has entered Mount Athos too. Probably, because of [three monks](#) who travelled to the UK at the invitation of

¹ See more details [here](#).

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the Archbishop of Thyateira and Great Britain, where they transported a fragment of the sacred relic of St. George from the Xenophontos Monastery. One more source says that the fault is of an Italian pilgrim (but he was then [negative to the test](#)). The monks had been quarantined and did not come into contact with anyone. A special disinfection was ordered at the Xenophontos Monastery upon the order of the Deputy Commander of Mount Athos. At the beginning, the Holy Community, only discussed the possibility of closing Mount Athos to the pilgrims, deciding that this should not be done for “spiritual reasons”, but on March 19th it took the unprecedented decision to prohibit admission to pilgrims and other visitors in order to safeguard its residents from the coronavirus epidemic (those who work on the Holy Mountain are still admitted, due to the Hellenic emergency rules).

The decision was in keeping with the recommendations of the Hellenic government, which adopted a very early policy of containment of contagion, restricting public gatherings and the possibility of outsiders bringing the highly infectious virus into the Monastic Republic too. In a first time, the issuing of admission passes was suspended until March 30, following the instructions given by the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew for the temporary suspension of churches services till the end of March, even though the Patriarch had excluded monastic communities from such closures and suspension of services. However, the increasing spread of the coronavirus and public health and safety concerns have taken precedence. In a second time, the closure has been extended and now it is a sine die provision.

Religious services continue to be conducted for residents of the community, which will continue to receive supplies from the regular ferries. Their worship has been modified too. For example, on Friday 27 March into Saturday 28

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March the monks of Mount Athos, in every monastery, skete and cell, held an all-night vigil against the pandemic of the coronavirus. The vigil was dedicated to the Panagia, who is the protectress of the Holy Mountain, as well as the Holy Hieromartyr Haralambos, who is noted especially for his miracles in vanquishing plagues and epidemics, including an epidemic that once infected the monks of the Holy Mountain and which he was responsible for dispelling. In all the monasteries, during Matins, a special canon to the Holy Trinity for deliverance from pestilence was chanted, as well as a canon to the Theotokos and a canon to Saint Haralambos. Also, during the vigil, were read [three special prayers](#) written for the deliverance from epidemics and pestilence.

So, even if the Monastic Republic has closed its port, worships and prayers continue. The Holy Community also asked to hold cross processions with relics and wonderworking icons at the discretion of and according to the custom of the holy monasteries. Do we have to admit that the measures taken in Greece have [so far been very successful](#), perhaps also thanks to the monks' prayers?