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Orthodox ceremony of Holy Fire takes place in deserted Jerusalem

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By REUTERS

APRIL 18, 2020 14:14



Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, apostolic administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem stands at the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the Good Friday service amid

restrictions due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Jerusalem's Old City April 10, 2020.
(photo credit: STEPHEN FARREL/REUTERS)

JERUSALEM - The Holy Fire ceremony symbolising Jesus' resurrection took place in a deserted Jerusalem on Saturday, without the joyful throng of Orthodox Christian pilgrims who would normally attend one of the most colourful spectacles of the Easter season.

Bells tolled above a near-empty Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Theophilos III, emerged from the crypt where Christians believe Jesus was buried, carrying the flame and accompanied only by a handful of Orthodox clergy, some wearing masks to protect against the coronavirus.

Outside in the medieval courtyard of the Holy Sepulchre, by tradition the site of Jesus' crucifixion, burial and resurrection, the plaza was empty of all but a few Israeli police and clerics maintaining social distancing.

The Holy Fire ceremony typically draws tens of thousands of worshippers to an imposing grey edicule in the Holy Sepulchre that is believed to contain the tomb where Jesus lay two thousand years ago.

Sunbeams that pierce through a skylight in the church's dome are believed by worshippers to ignite a flame deep inside the crypt, a mysterious act considered a Holy Saturday miracle each year before Orthodox Easter Sunday.

Jerusalem's Greek Orthodox Patriarch then lights a candle with the Holy Fire and disperses it to the faithful.

In normal years this would be to the thousands of tiny candles held by cheering worshippers packed into the corridors and passageways of the building.

But with Jerusalem under lockdown only a few clergy were present inside the church to receive the flame from the patriarch.

TV footage showed a handful of Greek, Armenian and Coptic Orthodox clergy, garbed in black and wearing blue face masks, standing outside the sealed tomb's wooden door.

The Holy Sepulchre church, like others in the Holy Land, was [closed](#) to the public last month amid precautions against the spread of coronavirus.

The Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox churches share custody of the building with Roman Catholics, who celebrated Easter last week.

Jerusalem has sites sacred to Judaism, Islam and Christianity. Leaders of all three religions have closed [holy sites](#) and urged followers to celebrate festivals at home this year.