

Holy Communion and the Coronavirus - A Pastoral Response

"In the fear of God, with faith and love, draw near!"

Anxiety over the spread of the coronavirus has led to concerns over our own communion practice in the Orthodox Church. Is the use of one chalice and one communion spoon one more source for spreading this virus? Is it safe, therefore, to receive Holy Communion in this manner at a time like this?

Different Orthodox jurisdictions have posted official statements on the coronavirus; but they have not really addressed concerns raised by our communion practice. A recent set of guidelines issued by one jurisdiction, for example, simply states that Holy Communion will continue to be administered according to normal practice. But that begs the question: is our normal practice safe?

Let me address this concern from my own pastoral perspective by describing the manner in which Holy Communion – Holy Eucharist - is prepared and received and *fully consumed* at each and every Divine Liturgy.



Many faithful may think that the Divine Liturgy begins with the exclamation, "Blessed is the Kingdom ..." and that it unfolds from there, culminating in the reception of Holy Communion. But, the Divine Liturgy actually begins with a short service called the *Proskomedia*: the "Liturgy of Preparation." This service starts about twenty minutes before the Divine Liturgy. Performed on a special table behind the iconostasis, the Proskomedia is when the priest prepares the bread and wine that will be consecrated to become the Body and Blood of Christ during the Divine Liturgy. The Lamb is cut out of the center of the *prosphora* (the bread offered for the Divine Liturgy) and placed on the Paten. The priest or deacon then pours wine into the Chalice. The priest strives to make sure that the gifts he has prepared at the Proskomedia are enough so that all the faithful who approach the Chalice may receive. (In my nearly forty years as a priest, I have never not had enough!)

At the Great Entrance, the Paten with the prepared Lamb and the Chalice with the prepared wine are carried in solemn procession and placed on the Altar. This bread and wine are consecrated at the *Anaphora*. The priest prays: "And make this bread the precious Body of Thy Christ. Amen! And that which is in this Cup, the precious Blood of Thy Christ. Amen! Making the change by thy Holy Spirit. Amen! Amen! Amen!" Through the invocation of the Holy Spirit "upon us and upon these Gifts here offered" (the *Epiclesis*), the bread and wine "become" the very Body and Blood of Christ.

The consecrated Lamb "now offered" is then "fractured" into four separate portions. One portion is immediately placed into the Chalice. One portion is reserved for the clergy, and the final two portions are reserved for the communion of the assembled faithful. Very hot water - called the *zeon*

- is now poured into the Chalice, signifying the blood and water that poured forth from the rib (*pleuran*, Jn 19.34; cf. Gn 2.21-22) of the crucified Christ on the Cross. The prayer that accompanies this sacred action refers to the "the warmth of faith, full of the Holy Spirit." The clergy receive Holy Communion first in the sanctuary. Then, the priest cuts the two portions of the Lamb reserved for the faithful into very small pieces and places them into the Chalice.

This brings us to the reception of Holy Communion by the faithful and the purpose of this pastoral reflection. Everyone partakes from the one Chalice by means of the one Communion Spoon. And yet, there is no indication whatsoever that anyone ever gets sick because of our communion practices.

What happens to the portion of the Eucharist that remains in the Chalice? As the rubrics prescribe: the priest or deacon "consumes the holy Gifts with all reverence and awe" at the end of the Divine Liturgy. I have been doing this for almost forty years now. So, after the Communion Spoon has been touched by many lips, after that same spoon has been dipped in and out of the Chalice perhaps as many as a hundred times, the clergy consume the remaining Eucharist after each and every



Divine Liturgy. And, it must be totally and completely consumed without a trace remaining in the Chalice. The Chalice is then carefully cleaned with warm water and thoroughly dried. It may be "cold season." It may even be "flu season." And now, we are threatened by the coronavirus. But, this must be done, regardless, by the clergy. *And yet, I am convinced that in these last forty years I have never become sick because of this practice.*

This is my experience and the experience of all the clergy that I know and have met throughout the years. I believe this is also true for the laity. For obvious reasons, this has never been tested and really cannot be tested; but, all indications are that the clergy and the laity have never become sick due to our communion practice.

This has never been proclaimed as a "dogma," but it is the living experience of the Church. The Eucharist is "life-giving," *never* "life-threatening," for it is the very Body and Blood of Christ, and we receive the Holy Eucharist "unto the healing of soul and body."

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