

The Eucharist and the CoVid-19

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In a reflection posted on the Orthodox Church in America website, I wrote the following in response to those who were condemning all precautions being used in Church: “The temple is a physical place in this world with the grace of the world to come. Those who claim that it is impossible to catch a cold in Church are also teaching that it is not possible to be fully human in Church with all the fragility that surrounds our human condition, because that fragility is somehow swallowed up by the surrounding divinity.” In that article, I also affirmed that “as Orthodox Christians, we universally believe that it is not possible to become physically sick from receiving the life-giving Body and Blood of our Savior.” As a bishop, I believe it is my duty to stress and proclaim that we are to “come boldly unto the throne of grace” with the fear of God and the fear of God alone, “that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” With that in mind, I would like to offer a small reflection on Holy Communion with thoughts that we know and of which we need to be reminded.

The Holy Eucharist is the living, sacramental core of our faith that recapitulates the entire economy of God the Word. Through Holy Communion we enter into the mystery expressed by Saint Athanasius’s words: “God became man, so that men might become god.”¹ In Holy Communion, our Savior’s touch opens the eyes of our heart,² the light from His countenance enlightens our darkened thinking³ and the warmth from His breath refines our physical and spiritual senses.⁴ Holy Communion purges our wicked thoughts,

¹ Saint Athanasius the Great *De incarnatione verbi* 54 PG 25b.192bc.

² First Prayer of Thanksgiving in *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, ed. by Fr. John Mikitsh and Hieromonk Herman Majkrzak (South Canaan, Pennsylvania: Saint Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2019), 167.

³ Prayer 8 of Saint John Chrysostom, in *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 153

⁴ Tenth Prayer of Saint John of Damascus and Thanksgiving Prayer of Saint Symeon, *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 155 and 169.

mortifies our passions, and protects us from the wiles of the evil one,⁵ so that with our sins now forgiven and washed in the Blood of the Lamb,⁶ we might more easily keep the commandments of Christ,⁷ and even be transfigured into peaceful, faithful, and loving men and women of God. Nourished by the heavenly bread, we enter the paradise of God's love,⁸ that incorruptible love that never fails.⁹ In the synergistic work of salvation, Holy Communion embraces the believer with the purifying, illumining, and deifying energies of the Holy Spirit necessary for the very likeness of God in us to emerge from the formerly darkened divine image in Adam.

While the purification and illumination of the believer's soul is the primary gift received through Holy Communion, that grace passes through the soul to the body as Saint Nicholas Cabasilas observes.¹⁰ Our bodies receive the living and deifying Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate. The Lord who healed the leper, who cleansed the woman with an issue of blood, and raised the dead is the very same Lord Whom the believer now receives to the healing of soul and body. Both the fathers of the Church and the preparatory prayers for Holy Communion indicate that communion is for the healing of the body,¹¹ but the health of the body is not considered the highest good, for such health is shared by the just and unjust,¹² the fowl of the air and the beast of the field.¹³

Miraculous healings of bodily sicknesses have certainly occurred through the reception of Holy Communion, but that healing by Christ is always associated with a healing for Christ, for leading a more perfect life in Christ.¹⁴

⁵ Second Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom, *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 146.

⁶ Rev. 12:11.

⁷ Second Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom, *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 146.

⁸ Saint Isaac the Syrian (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery 1984), hom. 46, 224.

⁹ Saint Ignatius of Antioch *Epistola ad Romanos* 7 PG 5.693d. Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:8.

¹⁰ *Sacrae Liturgiae Interpretatio* 43 PG 150.460d.

¹¹ Saint Caesarius of Arles *Homilies* 19.5 in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* vol. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1956-73), vol. 31,101.

¹² Saint Augustine *Sermones ad Populum. Classis I. De Scripturis* 72.3.4 PL 38.468cd.

¹³ Saint Augustine *In Evangelium Joannis Tractatus* 33.9 PL35.1647b.

¹⁴ Saint Augustine *Enarrationes In Psalmos* 97.1.1 PL37.1253: "ab sanatur illo, et non illi sanatur."

Holy Communion bestows upon the believer the very consummation of health which is the immortality of the whole person.¹⁵ Through Holy Communion, we enter into the Paschal mystery, we receive a pledge of the life to come¹⁶ and we obtain a provision for the journey to eternal life.¹⁷ Through Holy Communion, we receive not merely more life, but the very source of life,¹⁸ the fountainhead for our living forever in Christ and having Christ abide forever in us. Saint Cyril of Alexandria calls Holy Communion, “the bread that refashions the entire living being to eternal life.”¹⁹

Whether we are in fact nourished by the bread of life and healed by this spiritual medicine, according to various fathers, is dependent upon our piety towards God.²⁰ According to prayers that express the deepest sentiments of the Christian heart, we are to be seized with fear seeing the deifying blood, a fear before the holy chalice like unto the fear with which the angels stand before the throne of God. The reception of Holy Communion calls for faith, not doubt, boldness, not hesitation. “I believed therefore have I spoken... I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the Name of the Lord.”²¹ This means we view the Body of Christ and believe in the Body of Christ in a way that is completely different from that of the unbeliever.²² When the priest communes believers with the immaculate mysteries, believers behold the all-holy hand of Christ stretched out to them through the hand of the priest.

With the outbreak of the COvid-19 pandemic, a tremor of unrest has run throughout the Church concerning the distribution of Holy Communion. Orthodox hierarchs have universally affirmed that no virus or disease can be transmitted through Holy Communion. The official position of the Orthodox

¹⁵ Saint Augustine *Epistolae* 118.2.14 PL 33.439ab.

¹⁶ Fourth Prayer of Saint John of Damascus, *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 149.

¹⁷ First Prayer of Saint Basil the Great *Orthodox Christian Prayers*, 145.

¹⁸ Saint John Chrysostom *Argumentum Epistolae Primae Corinthios* 43.2 PG61.368c.

¹⁹ Saint Cyril of Alexandria *Expositio in Joannis Evangelium* 3.6. PG 73.517b.

²⁰ Saint John Chrysostom *In Salomonis Proverbia* 1.7 PG51.661d-664; Ambrosiaster, *Commentaries on Romans and 1–2 Corinthians* trans. and ed. by Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 174.

²¹ Psalm 116:9,13.

²² Saint John Chrysostom *Argumentum Epistolae Primae Corinthios* 7.1 PG 61.55b.

Church in America to this day is well expressed by Father John Breck's 2009 article in response to the H1N1 pandemic: "To declare that disease cannot be transmitted via Holy Communion is an article of faith; it cannot be proved to the satisfaction of everyone (it would in fact amount to proving a negative). Yet as Orthodox Christians, we have two millennia of experience that goes a very long way to confirm what we believe to be true regarding the 'real presence' of Christ in the Eucharist, a presence that is actually and ontologically real, true and accessible."²³ This is why the Holy Synod in its March 13, 2020 statement affirmed that "we nevertheless do not permit changes to the practice of giving Holy Communion."²⁴ The fact, that ninety percent of the clergy commune as they always have, indicates that they do not fear such a transmission.

Notwithstanding as a temporary measure and as a pastoral condescension of οἰκονομία, some hierarchs have also blessed the use of multiple spoons that are afterwards burned or sterilized. Bulgakov's *Настольная Книга* or *Guidebook* refers to this practice in the Stavropol Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church during pandemics occurring in 1889; about a century earlier the rigorist Saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain also mentions the same practice in a footnote in his *Πηδάλιον* known as *the Rudder*. As a matter of faith, these hierarchs were not afraid of contagion from a single chalice or a single spoon, but in a world paralyzed by fear of contracting the virus they were concerned that some of the faithful would not only refrain from receiving Holy Communion, but also feel guilty about these fears at a time in which they needed to be united with Christ more than ever. Other hierarchs following a stricter approach, that of ἀκρίβεια, especially those from the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Church of Georgia, the Church of Bulgaria, and the Church of Greece have maintained that no change should be made in the traditional

²³ John Breck, Disease and Holy Communion, October 2009, retrieved from <https://www.oca.org/reflections/fr.-john-breck/disease-and-holy-communion>

²⁴ Statement of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America on the Corona Virus retrieved from <https://www.oca.org/holy-synod/statements/holy-synod/holy-synod-issues-statement-on-coronavirus-outbreak>

manner in which Holy Communion is distributed, implying that the use of multiple spoons is a practice that undermines the believer's faith in the life-giving Body and Blood of our Savior.

The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church in America wrestled hard and long, hours literally, with the issue of keeping the faithful physically safe and spiritually strong. They were tacitly aware of Saint Gregory the Theologian's words, "there is a time for everything, and that which is good ceases to be good if it be not done in a good way."²⁵ It is not the best time to teach people when their thoughts are paralyzed by fear, but it is certainly the right time to love them precisely where they are. This was Saint Augustine's famous dictum: "Love and do what you wish: if you hold your peace, out of love hold your peace; if you cry out, out of love cry out; if you correct, out of love correct; if you spare, out of love spare."²⁶ That being said, there is a time for corrections to be made and personally I believe it is at hand.

The one fear that the faithful should have in receiving Holy Communion is the fear of God, not the fear of contagion. As Cassiodorus puts it, "Fear of people imparts a lack of confidence, but fear of God provides support for hope."²⁷ Elsewhere, he also writes, "The fear of God is not an anxious confusion but an undaunted perseverance, a state that is not altered by any change in this life, but remains focused on the same thing with a sincere conscience. For human fear changes with time and is not holy, because it cannot be productive."²⁸ Making allowances for the fearful at the beginning of the pandemic is an understandable pastoral condescension, but we need to teach and confess that the one thing to fear above all else is separation from God and that in union with Him through Holy Communion we have nothing else to fear and that is irrespective of the use of one spoon or many, one chalice or many.

²⁵ Saint Gregory the Theologian *Oratio adversus Eunomianos* 27.4 PG 36.16d.

²⁶ Saint Augustine *In Epistolam Joannis* 7.8 PL 35.2033.

²⁷ *Explanation of the Psalms* 25.14.32 in *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts* ed. by P. Tombeur. (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 253.

²⁸ *Explanation of the Psalms* 34.12.41 in *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts*, 264.

For those who use many spoons, it is important to return to using one spoon as soon as possible, because of what that one spoon, an extension of the one chalice represents. Robert Taft notes that “a shift in eucharistic consciousness reflects a shift in theology.”²⁹ This means changes in the symbolic gestures have dogmatic and spiritual consequences, for “faith and life, dogma and ethos, are organically and inseparably linked. This inseparable organic reality is expressed by the worship of the Church and lived in the worship of the Church.”³⁰ In other words, changes, even minute changes, in the way we celebrate the Divine Liturgy can alter our piety, the extent to which we have the fear of God, our ethos, the extent to which we are willing to labor heroically for the sake of Christ, and our theology, the extent to which we trust in the divine power of the grace of God.

From the earliest times, one cup has been an important symbol of the unity of the Church. For example, Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Christians of Philadelphia, “Take care, then, to partake of one Eucharist; for, one is the Flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one the cup to unite us with His Blood, and one altar, just as there is one bishop assisted by the presbytery and the deacons, my fellow servants. Thus you will conform in all your actions to the will of God.”³¹ It is the will of God that we drink of that one cup as a community of Christians, even as every Christian couple drink from one cup at the conclusion of the mystery of marriage. This symbolic, yet tangible, sign of unity is what God wills for us. As Saint John Chrysostom put it, “the same drink is given all - or rather, not just the same drink, but also to drink out of one cup. For our Father, desiring to lead us to affection, has devised this too that we

²⁹ Robert Taft, *A History of the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom* (Rome, Italy: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 2008), vol. 6, 118.

³⁰ Anesti Kessolopoulos, *Προτάσεις Ποιμαντικής Θεολογίας*, (Thessaloniki: Ekdoseis Pournara, 2003) 227. A change in reverence or piety extends into the realm of dogma and ethics as Saint Gregory of Nyssa has observed in *De Vita Moysis* PG 44.377b.

³¹ *Ad Philadelphenses* 4:1, PG 5.700b.

drink out of one cup, as [something] pertaining to love.”³² Union with Christ and union with each other as the Body of Christ is at the heart of the Eucharist. “The blood of the God Man... is also the unifying force that unites all the members of the Church into a single body, a single life, a single soul, a single divine human communion in a single divine human community.”³³ This is what we confess, this is what we believe, and it is crucial that our Liturgical practice again reflect this as soon as possible.

³² *Commentarius in Sanctum Matthaeum Evangelistam* 32.3 PG 57.38.

³³ Saint Justin Popovich, *Philosophie de la vérité: dogmatique de l'église*, trans. Jean Louis Palierne (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1997), vol. 5, 252.