

The Orthodox Church and COVID-19: Communion and Community
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My comments are designed to discuss the pattern of the Church's position on liturgical practices demanded by COVID-19 with an eye toward mission and the broader significance of communion – communion beyond ritual.

I will begin by discussing the global pattern of the Church seeking to sustain her rhythm of liturgical life with as little change as possible. The desire to sustain the status quo quickly evolved into a pattern of defending existing practices, a process that spiraled into a new variant of defending the true presence of Christ in the chalice as an article of faith. Orthodoxy is not alone in the seemingly natural impulse to retain the status quo at all costs. Adaptation requires effort and education, and people find comfort in familiar rituals, patterns, and habits during difficult times. What's significant here is the enormous amount of energy that was devoted to ensuring that minimal changes would be made to our customary liturgical life. What if we had taken some of that energy and directed it towards the exercise of ministry to those who are most vulnerable during the pandemic?

The energy devoted to defending and sustaining the status quo overshadowed the reality confronting the clergy and laity of Orthodox parishes – they were (and remain) unable to gather in-person. Some adapted to the limitations through digital and virtual engagements. The prolonged inability of the Church to gather in her customary space has exposed a crisis of community. COVID-19 is challenging our established notions of community space by forcing us to refrain from gathering and to focus our engagements with the people who live in our immediate neighborhoods. In some ways, isolation has changed the way that we imagine community.

It has become much easier for someone who would never or rarely attend a service to participate in a parish gathering through digital media. Let's also consider a reality experienced by Orthodox throughout America – many of our people drive long distances to attend an Orthodox Church, sometimes more than one hour. Has the pandemic illuminated the limitations of commuter parishes and their capacity to breathe life into their surrounding communities? Let us keep in mind that Holy Communion is inseparable from community – not only the community of the parish, but the global Church, and the one of humankind. There is food for pastoral reflection here.

The civil unrest in America caused by the killing of George Floyd and the shooting of Jacob Blake exacerbated the brokenness of the communities in which we live. We are learning that the walls of our parish Churches, our liturgical traditions, and the amalgamation of Orthodox identities are not impervious to the deep social fissures afflicting the world. These crises are not limited to America, as the unrest in Lebanon and Belarus demonstrates. In many cases, this crisis

is forcing us to engage in difficult conversations, and to reorient our lives to engage and confront the very “others” who live in our midst. The civil unrest and reinvigoration of movements for racial justice permeate Orthodox borders, too. How will we respond? Will we consider adding courses on black theology to seminary curricula, or establishing scholarships for black Americans seeking ordination? Are we willing to have discussions that disrupt our peace and invade our comfort zones?

While COVID-19 is a menace, it is also creating a new opportunity for the Church to reconfigure her mission. COVID-19 poses a flood of opportunities to us. Are we enslaved to the model of Orthodox parishes orbiting around property owned by a community – property that often demands commuting? Does the brokenness apparent to us present new opportunities for mission – to form communities that are not dependent on space and make service to the others in our midst a priority equal to our liturgical life? Can we imagine mission that exhorts Orthodox Christians to serve those in need without asking anything in return – including “becoming Orthodox”?