

## COVID Remarks

Fr. Anthony Roeber

1. Our primary obligation is to exercise charity and compassion toward those within and beyond the Church. We are called to avoid scandal both with regard to those who fear that our communion practices might harm parishes and larger communities, as well as those who are concerned that any measures taken to recognize the possibility of infection compromise our belief in the power of the Mysteries to heal both body and soul.
2. The outbreak suggests that we have not been altogether successful in our catechesis of our own people much less of those beyond the Orthodox faith. OTSA has for many years tried to find ways to encourage exchange of knowledge among theologians and scientists. We have been less successful in reaching the hierarchs who would profit from listening to what the resources providing by the Society could offer the Assembly of Bishops. The issue of the Eucharist and “communion” needs to be tied more securely to the Mysteries in general, especially Baptism-Chrismation-Eucharist and how these universally received Mysteries also inform anointing, confession, marriage, ordination, monastic vows. We need a deeper reflection on how the Holy Spirit moves in time and space. We need to find a more effective way of affirming both our faith in the power of the Mysteries to heal body, soul, spirit with the equal insistence that we may not demand the healing of the body in purely physical terms from God, even though we affirm that such instances have occurred and will do so but not at our convenience.
3. The pandemic is going to create pastoral issues long after the virus is brought under some kind of control. We should anticipate the need for grief counseling, “survivor guilt”, reconciliation of those who find themselves on opposite sides of the debate over “communion.”
4. Although the issues raised by these debates are to a degree global, the Church in North America needs to engage more vigorously the dismissal of hard-won knowledge, the scorn expressed for knowledge, whether in the hard or social sciences, humanities, theology. This issue needs the attention of the hierarchs in particular but after serious consultation with both lay and clerical contributors to these branches of knowledge. This attitude manifests itself sometimes in persons who come from the “traditional ethnic” Orthodox backgrounds as well as from converts from evangelical Protestantism that has a long-standing history of suspicion and anti-clericalism that has dismissed any form of knowledge thought to be irrelevant to “real life” pragmatism and thus inherently elitist. We cannot afford to indulge this or give affirmation to it. We cannot afford clerical or lay leadership that is not seriously committed to what is historically the attitude of the orthodox—that all forms of the knowledge of our created world plays a critical role in our developing understanding of our relationship to God. “Plundering the Gold of the Egyptians” should be understood and accepted by everyone and Tertullian’s sneer about “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem” has to be answered simply by: “a great deal.”

5. What we did not have time to engage but what I deem still problematic are two issues that are perhaps related. Sister Vassa correctly pointed out that there is no real theological or historical basis for communing the faithful with one or many spoons and reserving to bishops, priests, and deacons the more ancient practice of receiving the consecrated bread and wine in the hand and from the common chalice administered by the deacons. I concur with His Grace that symbols and how we serve really do send signals about our belief. But why then focus on a return to a “single spoon” as a symbol of a united body of believers when its use is not in fact universal but restricted to the baptized and chrismated, but not the ordained? I fear that what we are encountering here is the unresolved problem of clericalism and a kind of “sacramental elitism” that is not Orthodox—neither theologically nor historically. The related question that we could not engage is the one I pointed to only obliquely in my statement that we need a “deeper reflection on how the Holy Spirit moves in time and space.” If we hold that the Mystery of the Eucharist—and for that matter, the Waters of Baptism, the Oil of Chrismation, cannot possibly be conveyors of infections, how do we then defend ourselves against the charge of being Docetists? I don’t have the answer to this question but I do deem it important that this question should be a topic of careful theological investigation. I do not accept methodologically a selective quotation of this or that theologian’s assertions, in part because I believe the science panelists have demonstrated beyond question that the COVID virus is unprecedented—both in the virulence of its immediate and long-term effects, the rapidity of global transmission, and its hiding in persons who appear to be uninfected but are in actual fact, possible “super-spreaders.” Neither can we say that in the past when a notion of germ contagion was still unknown that bishops failed to take measures to prevent the spread of disease. And Fr. Mark’s contributions on that point should be included in OTSA’s deliberations. Much as I’ve learned in teaching the history of diseases from the Plague of Justinian through the impact of the Columbian Exchanges on the First Peoples of America through the Great Flu Epidemic (which killed my great uncle and nearly killed both my grandmother and aunt) we are facing a threat that is far more challenging. I have to return to my first insistence that we are obligated before God to exercise charity and compassion—but that cannot be done if we give the impression that those who are concerned about the possibility of infection via these created substances that are simultaneously the means of grace are lacking in faith—a position that is being bruited about among some Orthodox and which the bishops, in my opinion, need to denounce in no uncertain terms as sinful and more destructive of the Church’s unity than any measures being taken to minimize infections.