

OTSA Webinar:

The Coronavirus (Covid-19) and Communion Practice in the Orthodox Church

Theology Panel Summaries (and with expanded comments) and Questions

1. **Sr. Dr. Vassa Larin**, host of the online catechetical programs, “Coffee with Sister Vassa,” is a nun of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. She is a member of two commissions of the Inter-Council Presence of the Moscow Patriarchate: the Commission on Liturgy and Church Art, and the Commission on Canon Law.

Her remarks began with summarizing the complex history of Eastern Orthodox distribution of communion to the laity that culminated in ca. the 12/13th c. with use of the single spoon. She then focused on the positive consequences of the Covid-19 lockdown(s) for liturgical and ecclesiological awareness. Specifically, the (re)discovery and/or exposure of:

- The responsibility of the laity for the everyday prayer-life of the Church;
- The relevance of online-media for community-building, catechism, and the “liturgy after the liturgy”;
- The liturgical crisis among both the clergy and laity, stemming from poor/no catechetical instruction in Liturgical Theology and History;
- The crisis of church-authority, as demonstrated by the oft-unsuccessful attempts of hierarchs to introduce hygienic methods of distributing Holy Communion in the Covid-19 era.

2. **Deacon Nicholas Denysenko, PhD**, serves as Emil and Elfriede Jochum Professor and Chair at Valparaiso University. Dn. Nicholas is a graduate of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary (M.Div., 2000), and The Catholic University of America (Ph.D., 2008). His most recent books are *The People’s Faith: The Liturgy of the Faithful in Orthodoxy* (Rowman and Littlefield), and *The Orthodox Church in Ukraine: A Century of Separation* (Northern Illinois University Press). He is a deacon of the Orthodox Church in America, ordained in 2003. For more on the subject of liturgy and pandemics see <https://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2020/08/27/the-divine-liturgy-during-a-time-of-pandemic/>.

He reflected on the stress COVID-19 has placed on the Orthodox Church and the opportunities that have emerged to adopt new approaches to mission.

- Historically, the desire to sustain liturgical life with as little change as possible 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.
- The energy devoted to defending and sustaining the status quo overshadowed the reality confronting the clergy and laity of Orthodox parishes. 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.

- The civil unrest in America caused by the killing of George Floyd exacerbated the brokenness of the communities in which we live. 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.
- While COVID-19 is a menace, it is also creating a new opportunity for the Church to reconfigure her mission. 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”?

3. Rev Dr Anthony Roeber, Professor of Church History at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, Emeritus Professor of Early Modern History and Religious Studies at Penn State University and Second Priest assigned to All Saints of North America Antiochian Orthodox Church, Maryland Heights, Missouri. He is a past-President of the Orthodox Theological Society in America.

- 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 to parishes and to 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.
- 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. 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.
- The pandemic is going to create pastoral issues long after the virus is brought under some kind of control.
- 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.
- [Post-webinar comment] 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. 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. 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.

4. The Right Rev. Dr Alexis (Trader) of Bethesda (OCA), is an auxiliary bishop to His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon assisting him with stavropegial institutions. He lived in Greece for 23 years as great-schema hieromonk at the Monastery of Karakallou. He is a graduate of the University of Chicago (MA in divinity), Saint Tikhon’s Seminary (M.Div), and the University of Thessaloniki (Ph.D). He has translated several Greek books into English and edited other books in both Greek and English for publication. He is the author of *In Peace Let us Pray to the Lord* and *Ancient Christian Wisdom and Aaron Beck’s Cognitive*, both of which have published in Greek and in English. **The full text of his presentation (as well as opening and closing prayers) is available. The following summary is a selection of key points taken from the full text.**

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...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. 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." (Saint Augustine *In Epistolam Joannis* 7.8 PL 35.2033.) 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. 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, *a sign of our affectionate union with each other and with Christ...* 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.

Questions and comments

1. Questions and comments raised and addressed (at least initially) during the webinar

Have any Orthodox parishes reported outbreaks/cases related to liturgical gatherings, and more interestingly, are they required to report outbreaks/cases to their hierarchy? Or, are outbreaks/cases simply reported to public health officials?

Do we have evidence that deacons, who typically consume the remaining Holy Gifts from the chalice, using the spoon, or the priests who do so in the absence of a deacon, have ever gotten sick from any virus or disease therein?

Also we know that over the hundreds of years the clergy has consumed the remains of the chalice. Considering the poor hygiene and lack of healthcare over the centuries, the priests would have a very short lifespan. However we know that the opposite happens. The church itself would change practice (other denominations have done so). As an infectious diseases specialist I think this is as good a study we can get for the safety of Communion.

I'm a Coptic Orthodox priest, we still preserve the reception of both elements separately (we only offer them together to the sick-body intincted with the blood). Only now with the outbreak are we discussing offering the body intincted with the blood.

One of the survey questions focuses on "fear of transmission". In much recent discourse, the tendency has been to think in terms of fear for oneself. It seems important that we

extend what we mean to include fear of transmitting the virus to others, e.g. to those behind oneself in the communion line. Fear of infecting others is a kind of fear that is a form of care for others. Why do you think the conversation has pivoted so much on the faith vs. fear binary but left out the notion of care, care for others? [A response from another webinar participant: “This binary assumes that commitment to habitual practice is praiseworthy, and questioning that practice is a sign of a weak commitment to Church life. This assumption can make people blind to the possibility that such questioning can come from generosity of spirit, as the questioner notes.”]

This is refreshing to hear, namely, the dire need for interdisciplinary collaboration between the Academy and the Church, and especially in crucial times like a pandemic.

The tension between form and Spirit. From the Spirit's activity an organization grows to give form and substance to the Spirit. And form then becomes opposed to the spirit. Tension rises and we set about again to pay attention to keeping form and Spirit in balance.

For the "theology" panel: I've heard of historical precedence to changing communion methods in times of plague.... is there any evidence of this in Eastern or Western practice?

2. Questions and comments that could not be addressed due to time constraints:

Does the Holy Synod intend to change catechism teaching concerning communion, venerating icons etc.? Because everything that we were taught about the church and the Holy Mysteries seems to have been modified. How all these new innovations taking place in God's Holy Temple are NOT considered impious? Do you care about the future of the church? The TRUE FAITH THE ORTHODOX FAITH that has been taught by OUR HOLY FATHERS not modern men? Why is no one talking about the children. What about their faith? How can we expect there to be a future in OCA if we forget about our children. The Orthodox Faith is being deluded most youth seem to be speaking more like protestant rather than Orthodox Christians.

QUESTION: I noticed the survey conducted asks priests and parishes about how they are distributing communion. This is interesting information, but diverts attention from the real question, “What method of distributing communion will most effectively reduce the risk of spreading Coronavirus among Orthodox Christian communities?” When will the Synod of Bishops be asking that question and deferring to medical professionals or scientists who can actually provide scientifically credible and direct guidance that all parishes must follow, rather than leaving up to the choice of priests who may span the range of scientifically informed to liturgical fundamentalists.

Has the Orthodox Church been gathering actual data on COVID-19 illness within their parishes? What is their perspective on the reports of Orthodox priests and parishioners particularly in Russia, who ignored precautions and later gotten ill or died?

It would be interesting to know why the method of dropping Eucharist in the mouth became popular in some places BEFORE the issue of COVID, whether there are multiple reasons or one primary one.

Does anyone on the theology panel condone distributing communion with a shared spoon during the current pandemic?

Is there a service for discernment, sending spirit upon us to help us know what to do at this time? As a community?

RESPONSES

Implication of the end of the webinar seemed to be: changes in liturgical practice have been made only to accommodate the weak in faith and not to be in accordance with scientific reason—since “Orthodox” believe that faith triumphs over reason.

The bishop upended the rest of the conference. He had an agenda in advance and was not really listening.

Very disappointed with bishop. Felt scientists were just dismissed. Return to magical approach toward the sacraments.

Fr. John, this seminar was very informative and good. I think it opened the dialogue. I thought Bishop Alexis was very pastoral, but his argument of the one spoon, based on one cup, was a bit weak. We still partake of the one cup.

I hope that we could have a future seminar on change and community. I think Dn Nicholas' comments were powerful, and the discussion of liturgical practice can be expanded. I thought it was interesting that my comment was met that the priest could not make pastoral changes in liturgy, but can in his preference of using spoons (with blessings) So we can have differences within the allowable comfort zone of the bishops.