

Can We Talk? The Church and Her Academy in the Dialogue of Liturgical Renewal

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In the midst of the horrific Covid-19 pandemic, it would appear that humanity has entered into what many persons have labeled a “new norm.” Governments, societies, and communities have been making constant adjustments in policies and procedures not only to keep people safe but also to somehow maintain a sense of functionality without betraying the comfort levels of past generations. During this disconcerting time, the Church has likewise been facing unprecedented challenges in her own right with regard to liturgical practices,¹ requiring her to make swift, time-sensitive decisions for the welfare of her flock.

One of these areas has been the manner of the distribution of holy communion, whose discussion has flooded various social media platforms and has seemingly generated an array of controversial stances, leading to further angst and divisiveness within communities. While the Church, in her sensitivity to mitigate the dilemma, has offered textbook and politically-correct resolutions to address the communion issue, it seems she did not pursue consulting the expertise of liturgical scholars within the Academy, clergy and laity. Several of my colleagues felt compelled to commit to writing their own assessment of this dire situation and to offer their own recommendations,² on the basis surely of the availability of historical precedent, feasibility, and plain common sense. Unfortunately, there was no open dialogue, no tête-à-tête with the academic community. Nevertheless, albeit generally unsolicited and out of a sense of personal integrity (*φιλότιμο*) and love for our Church, several of us proceeded to express our thoughts and ideas

¹ See my paper entitled: “Back to the Future or Forward to the Past? Covid-19’s Positive Effects on Liturgical and Spiritual Renewal” (in Greek: “Επιστροφή στο Μέλλον ή Μπροστά στο Παρελθόν; Τα Θετικά Αποτελέσματα του Covid-19 στη Λειτουργική και Πνευματική Αναγέννηση”), in *The Church in a Period of Pandemic*, ed. Petros Vassiliadis (Thessaloniki, CEMES Publications, 2020). The tome is a bilingual collection of the papers delivered during the international online seminar (“Religious Communities and Church in a Period of Pandemic”), held from 6-10 April, 2020, and sponsored by the International Hellenic University (IHU) and the Center of Ecumenical, Missiological, and Environmental Studies (CEMES).

² See, for example: Fr. Robert F. Taft, SJ, “Byzantine Communion Spoons: A Review of the Evidence”, in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996) 209-238; Rev. Dr. Alkiviadis Calivas, “A Note on the Common Communion Spoon” (<https://www.goarch.org/-/a-note-on-the-common-communion-spoon--2020?fbclid=IwAR2UXZWgUwVOaqLBwzYqL9r6XKDaPDjSGZDo-qbss5Z5RUUMOCbbB5nqCKc>); Prof. Panayiotis Skaltsis, *Ο τρόπος Κοινωνίας δια της λαβίδος [The Manner of Communion through the Spoon]* (<https://www.pemptousia.gr/2020/06/o-tropos-kinonias-dia-tis-lavidos/>); several online interviews/essays by Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon, Dcn. Dr. Nicholas Denysenko, Dr. Daniel Galadza, and Dr. Will Cohen in *Public Orthodoxy* (<https://publicorthodoxy.org>); Sr. Dr. Vassa Larin, “Ways of Distributing Communion (Past and Present)” (audio lecture on Patreon: [https://www.patreon.com/posts/37323947?fbclid=IwAR1izEO9C4WQsWIL_rT7nJfqO6z2IuK7n2_WexMDpTU4YLMwPPmNCGE7Yzk](https://www.patreon.com/posts/37323947?fbclid=IwAR1izEO9C4WQsWIL_rT7nJfqO6z2IuK7n2_WexMDpTU4YLMwPPmNCGE7Yzk;));

and publish them online. Our continuous hope is to set into motion the synergistic process of informing and reforming,³ which ultimately leads to balanced, thoughtful, and judiciously considered decisions.

The exact reasons why dialogue between the Church and the Academy did not materialize in this instance are unknown and open to conjecture. Of particular interest may simply be the plethora of options for communion distribution (intinction in hand, tongs, multiple spoons, single spoon, *et alia*) and the levels of discomfort with some of the alternatives, not to mention the time sensitivity of the entire matter. In a letter addressed to the heads of all the autocephalous churches in the Orthodox world, dated May 17, 2020, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew requested that all churches exercise uniformity in the manner of how communion is distributed, inferring of course the customary use of the one spoon. This letter was followed by the encyclical to all daughter churches of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, dated June 25, 2020, in which the Holy and Sacred Synod definitively sealed its aforementioned position and made clear its expectation of compliance.

Scholarly and pastoral collaboration between the Church and the Academy is imperative, especially in times of crisis. Oftentimes, both institutions traverse the turbulent seas of life along parallel lines, with hardly any form of intersection or, at best, a minimal sharing of ideas. Members of one institution are already (or should be, anyway) members of the other. Orthodox Christian scholars, whether ordained into the ministerial priesthood or not, share in the prophetic office of Christ to teach, to inform, and to support the pastoral incentives of the Church. In this way, the royal priesthood of Christ (1 Peter 2:9), the baptismal birthright of every Christian, is fulfilled when the work of the Holy Spirit is not stifled or obstructed. Likewise, the Academy requires the presence of the Church leadership in its own domain, not only to offer literary and oral contributions, but also to guide and inspire the Academy to concentrate its efforts on studies that eventually benefit the Body of Christ and her members. Hence, we may speak of a mutually beneficent symbiosis, with the Church consulting and embracing its *own* Academy and the Academy laboring for and embracing its *own* Church.

To this end, I wish to offer a few proposals to ameliorate this at times strained relationship between the Church and her Academy. First, there is no reason why a hierarchical representative, who reports back to his own jurisdictional synod, is not attending the entirety of the annual meetings of prominent theological organizations such as the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA). While some bishops may indeed be members of said associations and of course are always welcome to take part, the attendance is uncharacteristically poor. Episcopal presence at academic symposia surely creates a greater visible sense of conciliarity among all the members and assures that Church and Academy operate as one informed voice in the world.

³ Here, I reiterate the sentiments of renowned liturgiologist and professor Fr. Robert F. Taft, SJ, who taught that the role of the Academy is to *inform* the Church, whereas the role of *reforming* ecclesiastical practice rests with the hierarchical leadership. The obvious insinuation is that when the former is communicated effectively, the latter can be enforced properly, and so long as the wise maxim of “creative continuity with the revered past” is upheld.

Second, lay or clerical theologians, university or seminary professors, should be attending the typically biannual synodal meetings of their bishops, upon invitation, and make informed and well-executed presentations on topics — liturgical, pastoral, or otherwise — that matter to the Church. The current crisis that has seen an increase in virtual attendance can facilitate this worthwhile endeavor. Subsequently, these presentations by specialists can be collected by the Church and published, either in individual tomes indexed by year or subject, as blog articles, or as monthly or bi-monthly entries in diocesan or archdiocesan newspapers. This will ensure the anticipated partnership of Church and Academe, inform the faithful, and assure them of a multi-angled approach to pressing issues of interest.

Finally, as is by now the longstanding practice of the Church of Greece,⁴ it is absolutely critical that each local and autocephalous church should establish specialized committees of clergy and lay academics, under the chairmanship of a synodal bishop, to explore, analyze, and report on topics of interest or critical issues. Their findings may then be incorporated into yearly national or regional clergy seminars or retreats, and finally disseminated through appropriate venues — online and print. In this way, again, a consistent transparency and unity of purpose will be evidenced by our collaborative efforts.

Liturgiologist Thomas Pott wrote: “True reform, animated by an apostolic concern, succeeds in creating a Church that is *other*, and not *another* Church.”⁵ This “other Church”, therefore, can only be the work of the fullness of the royal priesthood, guided by the Holy Spirit, for the mutual benefit of all her members. To exclude the full membership in liturgical renewal is to “limit” the Spirit and thus render “another church” foreign to its original vocation.

⁴ The Holy and Sacred Synod of the Church of Greece, housed at the Monastery of Petraki in Athens, possesses twelve synodal committees, each of which consists of specialized academics (clergy and laity), full and associate members, under the chairmanship of a local metropolitan. My involvement during my brief tenure in Greece (2005-2006) was as a member of the Committee for Worship and Pastoral Work, as well as the Special Synodal Committee for Liturgical Renewal.

⁵ Thomas Pott, *Byzantine Liturgical Reform: A Study of Liturgical Change in the Byzantine Tradition*. Trans. Paul Meyendorff. Book 2, Orthodox Liturgy Series (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2010), 32.