

Eucharist during Pandemic

Secular authorities around the world imposed several restrictions on the church gatherings and activities due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the first wave of spring 2020, various church functions were scrutinized by those in power, and by secular commentators. Among these activities the practice of holy communion attracted the most attention, because traditionally the Orthodox Church administers Eucharist from a single chalice and distributes it with a single spoon. The church critics have argued that this method of communion contributes to spread of the COVID-19 virus, while the defenders of the church have maintained such a thing to be impossible. The middle ground between these two extreme positions have been sought by learned bishops and clergy, who have proposed and introduced few minor changes in the method of communing the faithful in order to both maintain the practice and continue the liturgical services, and to reassure secular authorities and critics that the church was doing its best to follow new guidelines designed to fight the pandemic.

The issue if the holy communion in the Orthodox Church became hotly debated with extreme views proposed and refuted, because many in the church have felt that the existing practice is the only acceptable method for the church. Still others have claimed that the holy gifts could not transmit viruses, some citing their own extensive experience of not getting sick despite frequently sharing the chalice and the spoon with those who were visibly sick with common cold or flu.¹ There have been those who have suggested that changing the method of administering Eucharist would communicate a wrong message that the church itself did not believe in the fact that the holy gifts were the flesh and blood of

¹ Fr. Alkiviadis C. Calivas, "A Note on the Communion Spoon," *Orthodox Observer News*, 2020 <<https://www.goarch.org/-/a-note-on-the-common-communion-spoon--2020>>

Christ.² This argument has branched out into two implications: that those who were afraid to take communion through the old method had little faith,³ and that the consecrated holy gifts in their material form were not subject to earthly decay or infection.⁴

Administering the holy communion is the central point of the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church. Bishops, priests and deacons have administered the holy communion since the beginning of the church in Jerusalem more than 2,000 years ago. From the first century on there has not been a Sunday or a church holiday without a liturgy celebrated somewhere in the world with the distribution of the Eucharistic gifts as its central feature. The Orthodox Church has maintained the structure of the liturgy since the 1st century, and has kept the order of the divine Liturgy since the 4th century. This continuity creates an impression in many that the Divine Liturgy has not changed at all. However, even if the structure and order of the service is essentially the same as it was in the ancient times, some rituals and modes of conducting various parts of the liturgy have evolved and have been altered few times. Even though none of such changes have been revolutionary, sudden or dramatic, the introduction of spoon by the 11th century in the eastern part of the church was one of those gradual changes that met with objections in the West, and specifically in Rome.⁵

It is undeniable that the spread of COVID-19 has created monumental social and economic challenges in most countries around the world. Major adjustments had to be made to meet and overcome this challenge and the church could not

² “Священники: заразиться коронавирусом в храме через причастие нельзя,” *РИА Новости*, February 17 2020 <<https://ria.ru/20200130/1564079954.html>>

³ “Patriarch Daniel of Romania Speaks About Holy Communion and Epidemics,” *The National Herald*, March 6 2020 <https://www.thenationalherald.com/church/arthro/patriarch_daniel_of_romania_speaks_about_holy_communion_and_epidemics-255643/>

⁴ John Burgess, “Pascha and Pandemic,” *First Things*, May 1 2020 <<https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/05/pascha-and-pandemic>>

⁵ Ron Synovitz, “Coronavirus vs. The Church: Orthodox Traditionalists Stand Behind The Holy Spoon,” *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, March 17 2020 <<https://www.rferl.org/a/coronavirus-vs-the-church-orthodox-traditionalists-stand-behind-the-holy-spoon/30492749.html>>

ignore the threats posed by the novel coronavirus and fears that it instilled in society. A variety of ideas and opinions have been proposed and discussed both within the church and in a broader social context to allow the church operations to go on at some level, and at the same time to ensure health and safety of the faithful. However, there have been voices in general society and in political classes that have been hostile to the idea of administering communion during the COVID-19 pandemic or letting the church to function in order to meet its obligations.⁶ Some claims made by members of the church regarding the communion practice, and also about other aspects of religious practices, have been mostly made in response to these hostile critics of the church.

To avoid criticism, sanctions, and obviously, further spread of the virus among the faithful, Orthodox church jurisdictions worldwide have come up with a range of solutions. None of the measures have fully satisfied either the church critics or those defending the traditional ways. It is hard to think of the changes to satisfy some of the harshest critics of the church as they appear to disapprove the very existence of the church. However, those within the church who have been defending traditional ways have inadvertently opened a very interesting debate about the nature of the consecrated gifts, and acceptable methods for their distribution.

Judging by the published arguments regarding this matter it appears that those who have specifically focused on the nature of the holy gifts have been a minority among those who have objected to the changes in general. At the same time, the defenders of the single spoon method have voiced the most interesting opinions about the impossibility of spreading the COVID-19 virus through the traditional method of administering communion in the Orthodox Church. To be certain, there is no case, let alone a convincing case, of establishing a causal link between celebrating Eucharist in the Orthodox Church and spreading of the novel

⁶ Ibid. Also, Igor Bosilkovski, "North Macedonia's Orthodox Church Could Become a Coronavirus Super-Spreader," *Foreign Policy*, April 22 2020 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/north-macedonia-orthodox-church-communion-could-become-a-coronavirus-super-spreader/>> and Giorgi Lomsadze, "Communion in the time of coronavirus," *Coda*, March 16 2020 <<https://www.codastory.com/waronscience/pseudohealth/communion-in-a-time-of-corona/>>

coronavirus; however, there have been many concerned voices both inside and outside the church, some of which, especially in Russia, had very good reasons to be concerned.⁷ Hence, a variety of measures introduced by church hierarchs to alleviate fear and anxiety.

One of the methods that the Orthodox Church in Russia specifically used to continue administering communion safely involved the use of highly concentrated alcohol to disinfect the communion spoon between the communicants. This; however, was soon proven to be rather cumbersome, and the clergy did not have a clear idea how long to hold the spoon in the alcoholic liquid. Another problem that arose was the question of what to do with the parts of the holy gifts that accidentally ended up in the alcoholic liquid, and what to do with the liquid itself after the service. The liquid issue can be solved, but using alcohol to disinfect the spoon prolongs the communion process and makes people congregate around the chalice longer, which essentially defeats the purpose of this proposed change.

The Archdiocese of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in the United States authorized the use of multiple metallic spoons for communion from very early on.⁸ This method was initially viewed with suspicion and criticism, but its proponents seem to have prevailed through rational arguments, and the method has been used continually in various church jurisdictions worldwide. Another variation of this practice has been the use of single use wooden spoons to be burned after the service. Although the application of wooden spoons used to be common in poorer and remote parts of the Orthodox world in previous centuries, they were not single-use utensils.⁹ To use and discard by burning so many wooden spoons

⁷ “‘It is impossible to receive any illness through communion:’ As a massive post-Easter COVID-19 outbreak spreads through the Russian Orthodox clergy, here’s what high priests are and aren’t doing to stop the disease,” *Meduza*, May 4 2020 <<https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/05/04/it-is-impossible-to-receive-any-illness-through-communion>>

⁸ “Archbishop Elpidophoros explains why he instructed the use of multiple spoons for the Holy Communion,” *GreekNews*, May 31 2020 <<https://www.greeknewsonline.com/archbishop-elpidophoros-explains-why-he-instructed-the-use-of-multiple-spoons-for-the-holy-communion/>>

⁹ «РПЦ не исключила перехода к одноразовым ложкам для причастия,» *Interfax*, March 18 2020 <<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=74465>>

appears to be rather wasteful if instead one can use multiple metallic spoons to clean and disinfect them after every liturgy.

The Church in Romania initially allowed the parishioners to bring their own utensils to receive communion.¹⁰ Perhaps, this method also appeared to be acceptable, but there is at least one church canon that prohibits the use of personal utensils in distributing holy communion.¹¹ Most likely, the prohibition was originally introduced early in the life of the church to avoid highlighting vast economic disparities between the faithful – some would have brought expensive golden utensils to receive communion, while most could only afford crude wooden items. The economic disparities in modern Romania are not as dramatic, but this kind of innovation may encourage some unwholesome sentiments and can be harmful for the church in the long run.

There have been those who have insisted that the consecrated gifts simply cannot catch a virus or anything else that can be harmful to human beings. Metropolitan Illarion of the Moscow Patriarchate was quoted expressing this sentiment early in the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² Still others have insisted the holy gifts to be antiseptics and could kill the virus. In early March 2020, a Metropolitan of the Church in Georgia was interviewed by a Georgian TV channel, in which he advised the faithful not to be afraid of the holy communion.¹³ On the same day, a leading infection disease specialist in Georgia advised the church to adopt single use spoons for communion.¹⁴ It should be noted that the Church in Georgia remained largely opened during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic without changing the communion practice, but Georgia suffered very

¹⁰ “Patriarch Daniel of Romania Speaks About Holy Communion and epidemics,” *The National Herald*, March 6 2020.

¹¹ Fr. Alkiviadis C. Calivas, “A Note on the Communion Spoon,” *Orthodox Observer News*, 2020.

¹² Synovitz, “Coronavirus vs. The Church.”

¹³ “მიტროპოლიტი ნიკოლოზი: ღვინო რომელიც ბარძიმში სისხლად გარდაიქმნება ანტისეპტიკია,” *ნეტგაზეთი*, March 1 2020, <<https://netgazeti.ge/news/430913/>>

¹⁴ „ინფექციურის დირექტორი: რეკომენდაციას ერთჯერადი კოვზით ზიარებას გავუწევდი,” *ნეტგაზეთი*, March 1 2020 <<https://netgazeti.ge/news/430920/>>

low infection rates.¹⁵ The second wave in fall 2020 coincided with the end of the tourist season and the beginning of the election season in Georgia that were accompanied by mass gatherings, rallies and protests the damaging result of which was a dramatic spike in COVID infections and casualty numbers.¹⁶

Some among the Orthodox clergy initially resisted the restrictions imposed by secular authorities as they understood it to be overreach by the state.¹⁷ The proposed church lockdown and other restrictions imposed upon the church was met with strong resistance in countries like Greece, where outraged individual hierarchs condemned and even excommunicated key government officials.¹⁸ The comprehensive restrictions enforced on the church activities in Russia in spring 2020 triggered defiance and confusion with the Moscow Patriarchate largely trying to comply with the state directives, but individual hierarchs and clerics completely ignoring both the Patriarchate and the Russian government.¹⁹ The Church in Moldova openly disagreed with state authorities after the church services were resumed, but the traditional method of distributing communion remained forbidden.²⁰

By fall of 2020, Orthodox churches worldwide have imposed a range of changes or measures within the contexts of the restrictions and guidelines imposed within their own respective states. The outcomes of such restrictions have also varied, but the practice of administering communion in the Orthodox Church has not been contributed to the spread or virus regardless the method of distribution.

¹⁵ Lasha Tchantouridze, "COVID-19: The Case of Georgia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2020.

¹⁶ "Georgia's COVID-19 cases top 90,000," *Xinhua*, November 19 2020 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-11/19/c_139528225.htm>

¹⁷ John Burgess, "Pascha and Pandemic," *First Things*, May 1 2020.

¹⁸ "Communion Unchanged in Greek Orthodox Church Despite Virus," *Associated Press*, May 29 2020 <<https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-05-29/communion-ritual-unchanged-in-orthodox-church-despite-virus>>

¹⁹ "It is impossible to receive any illness through communion," *Meduza*, May 4 2020.

²⁰ "Молдавские власти уступили церкви — митрополия опять недовольна," *EurAsia Daily*, June 1 2020 <<https://easaily.com/ru/news/2020/06/01/moldavskie-vlasti-ustupili-cerkvi-mitropoliya-opyat-nedovolna>>

To be clear, some church gatherings have been blamed for community outbreaks of virus, but these have mostly been Protestant or Evangelical churches that do not practice communion in the manner of the Orthodox Church.

By October-November 2020, there remained a group of clerics in various parts of the Orthodox world who refused to adhere to commonly imposed rules of COVID-19 related restrictions. However, this resistance did not have links with religious services exclusively and members of the church were not alone in resisting excessive restrictions imposed upon diverse societies. When the first round of lockdowns were imposed in spring 2020, the measures were presented by state authorities as temporary as if those few weeks of strict restrictions would somehow overcome or defeat the novel coronavirus. Unsurprisingly, the virus refused to disappear after weeks-long lockdowns expired, and subsequently, the attempts to extend strict lockdown measures in the fall triggered open defiance in communities as distinct as soccer fans in Georgia and the Mennonite community in Steinbach, Manitoba.²¹ Very restrictive measures imposed periodically has been proven more difficult to endure for most people than moderate measures practiced for more extended periods. As a result, in some countries the COVID-19 virus spread did more damage in fall 2020 than it did during the first wave, in winter-spring 2020. Still there has been no proof that the virus spreads through the communion rite or by people attending church services. In the best of times, the percentage of the people regularly attending the church is very low – in Russia, with the largest Orthodox population in the world, it is no more than 3% during the best of times.²² During the pandemic, the numbers of the frequent churchgoers naturally declined while among those who attended services only minority takes communion – a tradition in countries like Russia, Ukraine or Georgia. With such small portions of population under scrutiny and harsh criticism it should have been easy to identify clusters of infection that originated from them if they

²¹ “Manitoba’s justice minister calls actions of protesters in Steinbach unacceptable,” *CBC*, November 15 2020 <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cliff-cullen-steinbach-rally-protestors-unacceptable-1.5802973>>

²² Vladimir Rozanskij, “Russians love Christmas, but not in Church,” *AsiaNews*, January 14 2020 <<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Russians-love-Christmas,-but-not-in-church-49021.html>>

ever existed during the first or the second waves of COVID-19. To be sure, the novel coronavirus did spread through some Christian communities, especially in Russia, but the contagion was not due the communion practice, but because of culturally significant close social contacts between monks and pilgrims or between clergy and parishioners or among clergy.²³

Even though some very strong opinions have been expressed defending the traditional and universally accepted single-spoon method of distributing holy communion in the Orthodox church, historically it is a relatively new method as it became traditional only in the second millennium. The issue of application of a single spoon during the communion rite is not a doctrinal question in the Orthodox Church. In fact, the spoon as an instrument of communion was introduced toward the end of the first millennium and was accepted in a wider use only by the 11th century. The early church mentions nothing about the spoon either in the canons or in the writings of the church fathers, not to mention the holy scriptures. Nicholas Cabasilas, a 14th century saint, mentions nothing about the spoon in his commentary on divine liturgy.²⁴ The spoon was, perhaps, more widespread during the times of St. Nicholas Cabasilas, but it is absent in his discourse due to no liturgical significance. The communion spoon is a utensil that is dignified and blessed in the liturgical service because it comes into contact with the holy gifts. The spoon has no intrinsic holiness as such, and it is not a divine object. Therefore, its utility and application can be changed or adjusted just as the Patriarchates of Constantinople, and Moscow and some others have done during the pandemic.

The Orthodox Church fundamentally believes and confesses that the Eucharistic gifts, the bread and the wine in the communion chalice, change into the body and blood of Christ through the power and operation of the Holy Spirit. However, the change is spiritual and mystical, not physical or chemical. This foundational principle has been reflected in the teaching of Orthodox theologians

²³ ““It is impossible to receive any illness through communion,”” *Meduza*, May 4 2020.

²⁴ Nicholas Cabasilas, *A Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*. New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997.

from the ancient times.²⁵ The Orthodox Church does not teach that the wine and bread in the chalice change into the blood and body of Christ biochemically – at the level of bio-molecular reality, the bread and wine remain earthly entities, i.e. subject to the laws of physics and chemistry.²⁶ Further, the church has provisions for the decay or damage sustained by the holy gifts through their contact to undesirable bacteria or fungi. It can happen that holy gifts presanctified and/or preserved in the altar for communion of the infirm can develop mold. This is apparently rather common in Russian church buildings that do not have adequate ventilation. In such circumstances the clergy are instructed to consume such gifts themselves and not to distribute it to faithful – a long-standing custom in the Church of Russia.²⁷ Further, if a poison is accidentally introduced in the communion chalice, for instance, through a poisonous insect or an object falling into it, and it becomes unfit for human consumption, the church advises to dispose the contents of the chalice in a special and safe manner.²⁸

The pandemic-related debate about how to administer the Eucharistic gifts never reached the level of criticality that some commentators have insisted it was acquiring.²⁹ A number of media outlets and writers have tried to portray the stand that some members of clergy were taking as a major threat to public health and safety. In April 2020, the church was accused of becoming a “super-spreader” in Northern Macedonia, which it did not become despite maintaining the

²⁵ Rev. Dr. Nicholas Denysenko, “Do the Sacraments Prevent Illness? A Survey of Liturgical Sources,” *Public Orthodoxy*, The Orthodox Christian Studies Center of Fordham University, March 19 2020 <<https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/19/do-the-sacraments-prevent-illness/>>

²⁶ Fr. Alkiviadis C. Calivas, “A Note on the Communion Spoon.”

²⁷ “Коронавирус и Причастие. Почему очищение лжицы ради каждого стало проблемой,” ДОН ПРАВОСЛАВНЫЙ, no date <<http://rostoveparhia.ru/stati/koronavirus-i-prichastie-pochemu-ochishchenie-lzhitsy-radi-kazhdogo-stalo-probleмой/>>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Yannis Baboulias, “Communion and the Coronavirus: COVID-19 Triggers Deep Orthodox Divisions,” *Balkan Insight*, April 27 2020 <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/27/communion-and-the-coronavirus-covid-19-triggers-deep-orthodox-divisions/>>

communion practice with a shared spoon for most of 2020.³⁰ There were even arguments suggesting that the exchange of opinions regarding changes in the communion practice was triggering “deep Orthodox divisions,”³¹ without actually providing evidence for such ‘divisions.’ *Coda* published a story “Communion in the time of coronavirus” in the online magazine section titled “War on Science.”³² Such panic-laden stories were not limited to English-speaking mass media. In Georgia, the coronavirus coverage by *Imedi TV* during the Pascha season reached a level of undisguised hysteria.³³

A more moderate approach has presented the debate about Eucharist during the COVID-19 pandemic as a controversial issue within the church, but nothing that approached criticality of schism or even deep divisions. There were people who initially approached proposed adaptations rather emotionally, but the Ecumenical Patriarchate issued official letters and guidelines from the very start of the pandemic.³⁴ Noted church theologians have produced clarifications and explanations about the nature of the holy gifts, the Eucharist, church utensils and other relevant topics.³⁵ However, the absence of a doctrine regarding the distribution of communion during the divine liturgy also means that the practice is open not only to adaptation, but also to interpretation and as such, many in the church have felt that the traditional ways were still preferable.

³⁰ Igor Bosilkovski, “North Macedonia’s Orthodox Church Could Become a Coronavirus Super-Spreader,” *Foreign Policy*, April 22 2020.

³¹ Yannis Baboulias, “Communion and the Coronavirus: COVID-19 Triggers Deep Orthodox Divisions,” *Balkan Insight*, April 27 2020.

³² Giorgi Lomsadze, “Communion in the time of coronavirus,” *Coda*, March 16 2020.

³³ იმედი <<https://www.imeri.ge/>>

³⁴ “Ecumenical Patriarchate Acts on Mode of Distribution of Holy Communion,” *Orthodox Observer News*, June 25 2020 <<https://www.goarch.org/-/ecumenical-patriarchate-acts-on-mode-of-distribution-of-holy-communion>>

³⁵ Fr. Alkiviadis C. Calivas, “A Note on the Communion Spoon;” Rev. Dr. Nicholas Denysenko, “Do the Sacraments Prevent Illness? A Survey of Liturgical Sources;” also “Editorial: ‘More Spoons, Fewer Spills’,” *Orthodox Observer News*, 2020 <<https://www.goarch.org/-/more-spoons-fewer-spills>>; and Dimitrios Anyfantakis, “Holy Communion and Infection Transmission: A Literature Review,” *Cureus* 12 (6), June 2020.

It should be noted that even though the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow had stopped talking to each other few months before the outbreak of COVID-19, learned clergymen from both churches spoke essentially with one voice supporting necessary changes to make the act of communion safer and to remove the grounds for unnecessary anxiety. These similar statements made by Constantinople and Moscow were not coordinated, but delivered independently from each other, perhaps reflecting the fact that these two church jurisdictions continue to follow the same doctrine, teachings, and traditions of the church.