

The Holy Church, Holy Communion, and an Orthodox Ethos

When believers enter an Orthodox Church, they are passing from this world of sickness, strife, and death into a realm of spiritual health, peace, and life. In a consecrated Orthodox Church, the Kingdom of God is at hand and the King of all is in their midst. Believers can feel the presence of the Godman through the life-giving, uncreated divine energies that are especially concentrated in a Holy Orthodox temple. These energies purify, illumine, and even deify the believer according to the receptivity of each. The sacred icons are not only windows to heaven, but a meeting place between the believer and the saint, a place of comfort, a place of healing, and a place of life. When believers venerate an icon with faith, they not only touch the Saint depicted, the depicted Saint also touches them. And when they partake of Holy Communion, receiving the most precious, most pure, most holy, Body and Blood of our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, they receive the Good Physician into their heart, cleansing it of all impurity. These are basic truths that Orthodox Christians espouse and that many are trying to defend in these uncomfortable days.

Unfortunately, some are using these same truths to criticize and even condemn the shepherds of Christ's holy flock for decisions that are in line with civil directives about social distancing, wearing of masks, and the means for distributing Holy Communion. They may argue quite convincingly that these temporary directives harm Orthodox liturgical worship, depriving it of its ability to be an icon of the Kingdom or for the faithful to feel as though they are one Body. They forget that we are living in dangerous times with far too many Orthodox Metropolitans, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons now taken from us into the mansions of the righteous through the corona virus. Unfortunately, these critics go further, construing concerns for safety as faithlessness, love for the flock as disdain for the fathers, and economy as apostasy. In so doing, they are rending the garment of Christ, becoming "false witnesses who speak lies and sow discord among the brethren."¹ They have zeal, but "not according to knowledge,"² for if it were according to knowledge, their words would be kind, longsuffering, thinking no evil, not easily provoked, bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things and enduring all things.³

The Church has overcome such controversies in the past and She will overcome them today. The Church historian Socrates Scholasticus writes about a similar situation at the time of the Origen heresy:

By clever arguments, he [Dioscorus] took advantage of the simplicity of these monks and thus a fierce controversy was stirred up among them... The less informed, who greatly exceeded the others in number, were inflamed by an ardent zeal, but not according to knowledge. They immediately raised their voices against their brethren. Thus, they were divided with both parties branding each other as impious.⁴

Today, by clever or not so clever arguments, some are taking advantage of the simple faith of believers in order to stir up controversy at the very time when Christians should be united in love and care for one another. Behind these arguments, however, is a deep misunderstanding about the nature of grace and even the incarnation itself.

With respect to the incarnation, our Lord is perfect God and perfect man. Saint John of Damascus thus teaches that in our Lord "the created remains created, and the uncreated, uncreated. The mortal remains mortal; the immortal, immortal. The circumscribed remains circumscribed; the uncircumscribed, uncircumscribed. The visible remains visible; the invisible, invisible. 'The one part is all glorious with miracles: while the other is the victim of insults.'"⁵ The same is also true for the Church, the Theanthropic Body of Christ. It is a divine place where miracles take place, where the blind see the true Light and the deaf hear the Gospel of grace. It is also a human place where we give the last kiss to the dead. Corruption and incorruption are both present in Church as they are both present in our lives as Christians. Those who claim that it is impossible to catch a cold in Church are also teaching that it is not possible to be fully

human in Church with all the fragility that surrounds our human condition, because that fragility is somehow swallowed up by the surrounding divinity. On December 28th of each year, we celebrate the memory of the two thousand Christians who died, being burned alive in Church. The Church did not magically keep them healthy or immune from the laws of nature as in the case of the three children in the fiery furnace, but it was the place from which they were transferred from this world into paradise. The Church saves the soul, but it does not, nor has it ever promised a state of incorruption prior to the general resurrection. The temple is a physical place in this world with the grace of the world to come. It is both physical and spiritual. In its materiality, the wood, the marble, the air of the temple do not differ from the same substances in the outside world. In her spiritual radiance, however, the temple provides the receptive believer with everything necessary in order to act, think, perceive, and desire in perfect harmony with the Gospel of Christ.

As Orthodox Christians, we universally believe that it is not possible to become physically sick from receiving the life-giving Body and Blood of our Savior, but we also give Holy Communion to the dying to accompany them into eternity. None are surprised that the dying die after receiving Holy Communion; we sometimes even read prayers afterwards that they may give up their souls into the hands of God. Communion itself is not received in order to preserve physical health in this world as though that were an ultimate good. Such a view in fact betrays a secular ethos that completely forgets the aim of the Christian life, becoming like Christ who pours out His life for the life of the world.

Holy Communion is received unto the remission of sins and life eternal. Through Holy Communion, we enter into the entire economy of salvation from the incarnation of God the Word to His session at the right hand of God the Father. The Blood of the Godman unites God to man and the members of the Church with each other into a single Body, a single life, a single soul. Through communion, we become one with Christ, one with our brother and our sister, one with the Saints, one with the entire Church, in which there is no separation between the living and the dead, for all are then one in Christ Jesus. Saint Justin Popovich writes “the divine blood of the Lord is a divinely human power that sanctifies, purifies, and transfigures, making the believer ecclesial, theanthropic, trinitarian, and saved.”⁶ It is not about the physically healthy remaining healthy, but about the struggling spiritually becoming holy.

Health and sickness, baptisms and funerals, are part of life. On the Holy Mountain of Athos, in the sacred cenobitic monasteries, most of the monks become sick during the flu season. No one is surprised; no one doubts their faith. And when they are sick, the monks take medication and rest up in their cells. Many of those same monks receive flu shots as a preventative measure, so that they will not become sick, so that they will be able to pray consistently before God. Parishes are now taking preventative measures, so that the faithful may be healthy enough to pray and offer up fruits of repentance. The additional measures are much like the flu shots received by Athonite monks. They are not about our faith in the mysteries, but about our love for our neighbor.

Saint Paul asks that we do all things “decently and in order.” It is right that we follow the directives now in good order, for “nothing builds up as much as good order, peace and love, just as nothing is more destructive than their opposites.”⁷ For the sake of good order, for the sake of peace, for the sake of love, let’s seek what the Church is teaching us during these difficult times: to place our brother and sister first, to walk humbly before God, and to wait patiently for the day when our glorious Divine Liturgy will be celebrated exactly as it has been in ages past. That day will surely come. May it come quickly. Amen.

¹ Proverbs 6:14.

² Romans 10:2.

³ 1 Corinthians 13:4-6.

⁴ *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.7 PG 67.688bc.

⁵ Saint John of Damascus *Expositio Fidei Orthodoxae* 3.3 PG 94.993c.

⁶ Justin Popovitch, *Philosophie Orthodoxe de la Vérité*, vol. 5 (Paris: L’Age d’Homme, 1997), 252.

⁷ Saint John Chrysostom, *Argumentum Epistolae Primae Corinthios*, 37.4 PG 61.318b.