

Common Chalice & Spoon / Kissing Icons

Question

This question does not mean to be offensive, but the issue of the possibility of spreading disease from contact with icons and the cross during veneration, and also from the communion spoon, has come up more than once from inquirers at our mission parish. One couple did not join the church because of their concern with receiving communion from a common chalice and spoon. Another inquirer was willing to accept that the Eucharist would not spread disease, but they were concerned with venerating icons, and asked if it was absolutely necessary to venerate icons and the cross by kissing them, or would it be acceptable to bow close to them or make some other form of physical contact beside kissing.

Especially in modern times, where the spread of disease is understood better and there are diseases such as herpes and AIDS, we need to understand this concern, be able to properly explain it to people and ourselves, and understand what alternatives are acceptable.

Could you please address how we should view the possibility (or impossibility) of the spread of disease from (1) veneration of icons and (2) from the common chalice and spoon?

Answer

I hope that you will not consider my answer to be brief or glib, but there are only a few things one can say concerning these matters.

With regard to the reception of Holy Communion:

If one receives Communion in the proper manner, one would tilt one's head back and open one's mouth as wide as possible, thereby allowing the priest to simply drop the Body and Blood of Christ into the communicant's mouth without ever coming into contact with the spoon.

Even when the spoon does come into contact with one's mouth, it is highly unlikely that viruses such as AIDS would be transmitted since it has been widely reported that the AIDS virus is rendered impotent when it comes into contact with air or water; it has been widely reported that even the transmittal of AIDS through saliva is rare; the alcohol content in the wine which becomes the Blood of Christ, combined with the boiling hot water added to the chalice right before the reception of Holy Communion, kills most viruses and other germs.

We, as Orthodox Christians, firmly believe that what is being received is the Body and Blood of Christ. It is a matter of faith that one cannot contract a disease from the Body and Blood of Christ.

On the lighter side, the priest or, in parishes that have a deacon, the deacon consumes the remaining Eucharist after it is distributed to the faithful. There are no cases of clergy becoming infected as a result of consuming the Holy Gifts after the Liturgy.

I believe that quite a number of years ago the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese had checked all of this out with a group of doctors, all of whom drew the same general conclusions that the transmittal of disease via the chalice—especially the AIDS virus—is not possible.

With regard to the kissing of icons and the cross: I have never heard of anyone who has become ill as a result of this. Of course, there may be cases in which individuals with serious flus or other ailments may wish to refrain from doing so.

I have been a parish priest for 25 years and have never encountered these concerns, nor have I ever feared for my health as a result of receiving or consuming the Eucharist or kissing an icon or cross—and, believe me, priests come into contact with such things much more regularly than the laity. While I have heard from time to time concerns about the Eucharistic spoon, it would seem that the reception of the Eucharist directly into the mouth from the priest's hand, which may very well come into contact with a communicant's tongue and lips, may very well be less sanitary. The same would go for those confessions in which the faithful partake of the chalice by drinking directly from it.

Following the Eucharistic Liturgy and the consumption of the remaining Holy Gifts by the priest or deacon, the chalice, diskos, and spoon are usually cleanse with boiling hot water and carefully covered, protecting them even from the air, dust, etc.

While I would acknowledge that there are a host of viruses and diseases making the rounds in today's world, it would seem that in times past matters were somewhat worse. The Bubonic plague and Black Death come to mind here. So are the more recent times in which TB, polio and other diseases were rampant. If one focuses their faith on Jesus Christ, one must assume that His Body and Blood, which is the "fountain of life and immortality," simply cannot be the cause of illness, disease, or death.

Finally, I would ask an individual who would opt not to explore entrance into the Orthodox Church because of the Communion spoon if he or she is equally cautious about eating in public places. There have been far more reported incidents of people acquiring hepatitis, ecoli, and other diseases and conditions at restaurants, receptions, picnics, etc. than from the Eucharist. Just last week in Chicago quite a number of restaurants were shut down after rodent droppings were discovered in their kitchens—and some of these were well known, reputable establishments. Consistency would dictate that those who fear the Eucharistic spoon might also refrain from eating in any public establishments. After all, doing so implies that we put our faith in the owners, managers, and servers and their willingness to make sure that everything is sterile and virus free. Such, of course, is not always the case. [Recently there was a case in our area of 80 people who had contracted hepatitis at a wedding reception. It was subsequently discovered that one of the cooks was a carrier. Makes one wonder!]