

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople in church. Photo: Nikolaos Manginas.



STATE OF AFFAIRS

Life and Death in the Time of Covid-19

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The world has reached an unusual moment in history: a single disease has made a deep and lasting impression on the population of the entire planet. The sickness and death may last a long time. The consequences of the shutdown necessary to control the burden of the pandemic on medical infrastructure have left joblessness, poverty, and unrest around us. The divisions in US culture are only made more dramatic at this moment, and there is a tangible threat to life as we know it.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also posed unique challenges to faith-based communities in the US and worldwide, forcing people of faith in the US to consider scientific issues from a new perspective. The range of responses has been very broad, with some communi-

ties ignoring epidemiological evidence and continuing to hold church services unchanged while others take up the challenge and craft unique responses to prevent the spread of infection within their communities. Having assessed the potential dangers of activities such as singing and chanting or sharing a spoon for communion, many congregations developed new rules of conduct for the time of Covid-19.

The response to the pandemic might help us define some of the issues that shape religious responses to science in general and could provide a concrete tool for ascertaining a parish community's attitudes toward science. Covid-19 provides a unique situation where lives are at stake and the actions advised by the scientific community

are not just morally neutral, but intended to save lives. In the science-religion realm, response to handling a deadly virus is not an abstract political question such as “How do you respond to evolution?” or “What do you think about stem cells?” There is probably no other issue where failure to follow the science can put lives at risk as easily as disregarding social distancing and face covering rules, and yet the response from faith-based communities has been remarkably varied.

Covid and Communion

How has the Orthodox Church altered its approach to celebrating the Liturgy and conducting other Church functions during this time of the pandemic? The reaction has been mixed and difficult, and most bishops have taken attitudes that do not seem to reflect the scientific evidence. Orthodox scientists and physicians have called for using multiple spoons in communion to reduce the opportunities for spread of the virus. Public health authorities in some countries (such as Austria, Germany, and Australia), have not permitted the distribution of communion from a single spoon. Nevertheless, Orthodox hierarchs have largely denied these scientific claims, insisting instead on a quasi-theological, magical argument that the body and blood of Christ can never transmit any disease. This position prompted much discussion within the Orthodox Church through private discussions, conference calls, and webinars designed to address possible approaches to communion in light of the pandemic. Blog posts (for example on *Public Orthodoxy*) have examined the issue from multiple angles. Many hierarchs share the view that nothing bad can occur from receiving holy communion, and that it is wrong, even sinful, to suggest that Covid could be passed through the communion cup. Deep-

ening the chasm of magical thinking, several hierarchs have gone so far as to proclaim that if you receive communion believing that it can be a vector for infection, you risk being punished by getting Covid.

As a scientist, I acknowledge that Covid (and other viruses as well) can be passed through the use of a single spoon in a parish setting. However, while most viruses encountered in recent decades, such as HIV, are unlikely to infect people via the chalice, this is not the case for Covid-19. The volume of information obtained by virus tracing in this pandemic is overwhelming, and the knowledge we have is nuanced and abundant. I do not understand our hierarchs’ reluctance to acknowledge this.

Here are some of the major arguments currently offered for why we should not change our practice of Communion from single spoons:

1. “It is heresy to say that disease can result from receiving communion.” This is perhaps the most prevalent comment from hierarchs. Our Church fully accepts that the bread and wine in the communion cup remain bread and wine even while mystically and inexplicably (but not magically) becoming the body and blood of Christ. Bread and wine are subject to certain corruption even after consecration. For example, concerns about the bread becoming moldy if left in the Church too long are often raised by priests during Great Lent. If the body and blood of Christ can get moldy, can they also be infected with Covid? It is true that transmission from food has not been established, and that the virus is predominantly respiratory in nature. Nevertheless,

receptors for the virus have been found in the gut, suggesting the possibility of infection through ingestion. In addition, saliva has one of the highest viral counts of any bodily fluid in infected individuals, further suggesting the dangers of a common spoon. Indeed, the CDC recommends “good hygiene practices” when serving food. Obviously, such good hygiene would not include eating from a common spoon.

2. “The chalice and spoon are made of gold and therefore protected against viruses.” This idea is based in faulty science. While it is true that gold is less adhesive than many other metals, contaminants have been found on gold and gold-plated materials for centuries. The adherence and survival of coronavirus particles on different materials is determined more by humidity and temperature than on the surface material.
3. “The wine in the cup will kill the virus.” This too is based on faulty science. The alcohol content of the wine when diluted with water is perhaps 10% at best, far short of the 60–70% needed to kill the coronavirus.
4. “No one has ever gotten sick from receiving communion.” There have been no reported scientific studies examining illness following reception of holy communion. In the past, before the Covid pandemic, one reporter examined 700 people who received communion in the Roman Catholic Church and found no higher rate of disease than what was found in the general public. Not only did this study not follow proper scientific methods, however, it also took

place before Covid existed, so the reporter only tested for symptoms of the common cold and influenza. The virus causing Covid-19 is far more infectious than those diseases, with fewer treatment options available and death a more likely outcome.

5. “The Church has always used spoons. Changing to another method of distributing communion would destroy the tradition of the Church.” This is false. Historians report that the spoon was not introduced in the Church until the 1200s, when it was seen as an innovation and taken up variably in different regions. Orthodox Christians have used multiple approaches to distributing communion throughout the centuries.
6. “Using one spoon for the parish reflects the unity of the people.” In smaller parishes with one priest, it is indeed common for one spoon to be used to administer the Eucharist for the entire parish. Nevertheless, in congregations served by several priests, it is common to use many spoons at the same time, thus “dividing” the parishioners. In fact, especially on occasions when the bishop serves, many priests may distribute communion to the faithful. When Ecumenical Patriarch Demetrios visited Chicago and celebrated an outdoor Liturgy in Grant Park, more than 20 chalices (and 20 spoons) were used to distribute communion.
7. “The only people who get Covid from the communion chalice will be those who do not trust the Church and believe that disease can be spread from the body and blood of Christ.” This proposition suggests a vengeful God

who punishes people by giving them Covid. The Christian God does not punish people in this way. Moreover, approaching the chalice thinking “God, I dare you not to make me sick from this Eucharist” amounts to tempting God. This was one of the temptations of Christ by the Evil One in the desert: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down,” said the demon. “For it is written, ‘He will give his angels charge of you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” Christ answered, “You shalt not tempt the Lord your God.” (Matt. 4:6-7)

8. “If you are afraid of getting infected from the body and blood of Christ, you should not approach.” This is a common mindset that in some ways fails to recognize just how important the Eucharist is for salvation. If Christ meets all people where they are, is it right to deny those who might fear the healing grace of the divine mysteries? In the communion prayer, we quote Saint Paul, saying, “I believe, O Lord, and I confess that you are in truth the Christ, the Son of the living God, who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first”, acknowledging our unworthiness as we approach the chalice. We are all uniquely unworthy and, as a consequence, equally in need of reception of the mysteries.
9. “Young people do not get infected, the elderly are more vulnerable, so until a vaccine is developed, those over sixty-five should be banned from attending church.” This type of reasoning has the Church playing the odds game. It is true that those who are older and those who have many comorbidities (such as

obesity, diabetes, and heart problems) are at higher risk of dying of the disease, but young people have died as well. Recent studies have shown that even children as young as ten years can pass the disease on to others. Predicting likelihood of death is not a game the Church should play. The Church needs to be a place of refuge for all. “Being made in the image and likeness of God, each person is unique and infinitely precious, and each is a special object of God’s love. As Christ taught, even the hairs of [y]our head are all numbered” is noted in the recently released patriarchal social ethos document *For the Life of the World*.¹ If God says we are all important, should we not treat everyone that way?

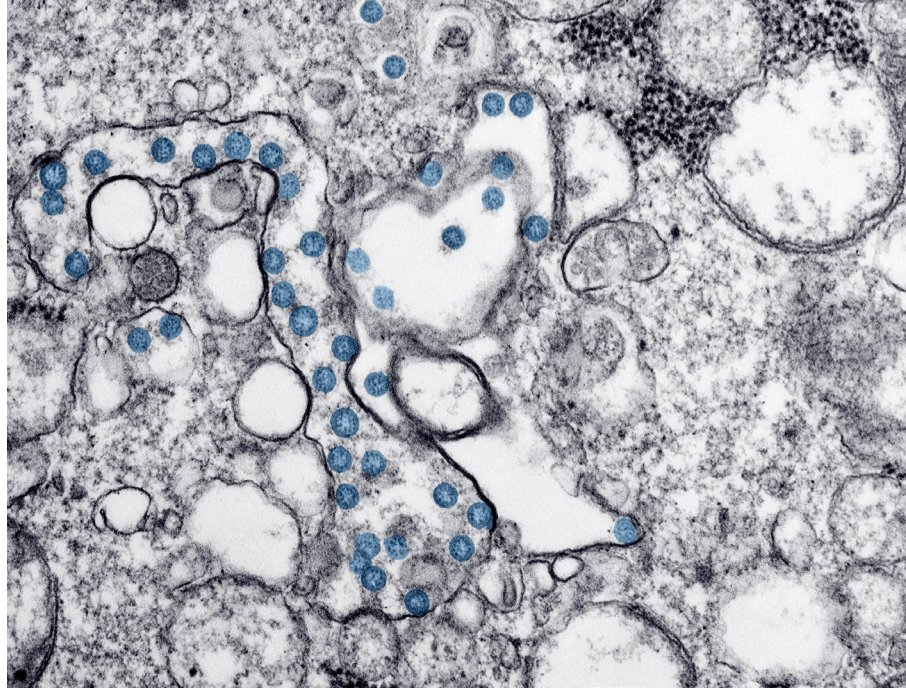
One might ask why Orthodox hierarchs have been reluctant to accept the science of the day, especially in such a serious situation. Covid is a disease that leads to death, and health authorities have made many (often controversial) recommendations to save life and decrease rates of infection, and prevent overcrowding in hospitals. In the past, students and others have often asked if the Orthodox Church is anti-science. My answer was always, “No, we Orthodox are friendly to science. We are the church of the fathers, many of whom were scientists in their own right.” This year, that answer has changed. I find my Church taking a stand that is opposed to science and the public health authorities in many cases.

What is perhaps more puzzling is the “peer pressure” nature of the response. At the outset, many hierarchs permitted their parishes to use multiple spoons. Then, very quickly, this changed, as other bishops changed their positions on the issue. If it was

¹ *For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, ed. David Bentley Hart and John Chrysavgis (Brookline: Holy Cross Press, 2020). The document is also available at <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>

² Richard Read, “Scientists to choirs: Group singing can spread the coronavirus, despite what CDC may say,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-06-01/coronavirus-choir-singing-cdc-warning>.

Transmission electron microscopic image of an isolate from a case of COVID-19. The spherical viral particles, colorized blue, contain cross-sections through the viral genome, seen as black dots. US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention / Hannah Bullcock, Azaibi Tamin.



acceptable at one moment, why did the idea of multiple spoons lose favor? We saw countless videos of parishes under the jurisdiction of bishops who had forbidden multiple spoons in which cameras were turned to face the wall during communion. One could hear the clanking of metal spoons after each communicant, but the video was obscured to conceal what was being done. In other words, priests were responding to the issues raised by their faithful to ensure that parishioners could receive the holy Eucharist even when the bishop had ignored the concerns. Are the bishops aware of these practices? No doubt, at least in some cases, they are, and the result seems to be a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. What does it say about the Orthodox Church as a whole when bishops are aware of a deception and do not respond to it?

Other Issues

A related issue is the practice of singing or chanting in the Church. The spread of Covid via aerosolized droplets is well established. Numerous studies have shown that the infection rate among choirs is high if even one mem-

ber is infected. A highly publicized report by the CDC demonstrated that at least fifty-three of the sixty-one people at a Seattle choir rehearsal were infected with Covid, and several deaths resulted.² Reports in Amsterdam and elsewhere have shown similar results, and numerous scientists who work on aerosolization studies have explained the science behind the observation. All of this evidence led to an initial recommendation that choirs not sing. However, this restriction was lifted by the CDC as the government expressed concerns about religious freedom. The advice not to sing in church remains, but it is no longer recommended—an example of the confusing nature of United States government guidance on Covid.

When the Los Angeles mayor made it an offense to sing or chant in religious communities, some Orthodox bishops strongly protested, noting in some cases that those marching in demonstrations were often unmasked and were not stopped from shouting. Of course, they failed to appreciate that the marches were held outdoors, which markedly decreases the risk of expo-

sure due to unimpeded air circulation. In churches, as in other indoor venues, spread of the virus is much more likely. Is it possible to sing or chant safely? Possibly, if there are one or two singers, particularly if they are chanting away from the people or towards the wall, and keeping a distance equivalent to what the priest keeps when he is chanting the service. In these examples, perhaps one can appreciate that the Orthodox bishops were working to protect their parishes from inappropriate and heavy-handed rulings, but cooperating with authorities rather than protesting their responsibility here would have been more reasonable. The Church should work with the authorities to save lives. Their goals should be the same. We might disagree on approaches, but total defiance in this situation only puts more lives at risk. Ignoring the science is not only wrong; it can also be fatal, as the choir in Seattle learned.

Another reality is the loneliness of death for many Covid patients. Often the sick are brought into facilities that cannot handle visitors without compromising the care of others. This means that many are left to die without a final touch from a friend or loved one. Funerals have been curtailed or cut short as well, in order to decrease infections and exposure. The Church needs to explore new ways of sharing grief in these situations. Conventional practices of mourning in services, funeral homes, and house visits may not be possible on a routine basis for some time, so new approaches to sharing and expressing consolation and hope through virtual visits and frequent phone calls should be explored. *For the Life of the World* notes the following as a consolation for death: "In the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the Church defines a 'good, Christian ending to our lives' as 'peaceful, with-

out shame or pain,' and prays that all Christians might know it as such. In other prayers, it expresses the hope that the dying might leave this life secure in the knowledge that they are treasured, for even the sparrows cannot fall without God seeing them." One of our goals as members of the Church is to help others realize at the end of life that they are treasured.

Puzzled

Why have many hierarchs taken an anti-science attitude when dealing with the Covid situation? The pandemic has been a period of remarkably fluid information that comes in waves and spurts. Keeping up with it all has been difficult even for those in the sciences, who are used to reading complex papers about epidemiology, viral proteins, and aerosolization. When the hierarchs made their decisions, which scientists did they consult to reach their conclusions or to help them keep up with the latest information? Many scientists have contributed their expertise to their parishes, helping to set up as safe a praying environment as possible and advising about the distribution of communion and other sacraments. Generally, in churches that take the advice of their scientist parishioners, one finds the use of multiple spoons and measured, controlled singing or chanting. Nevertheless, numerous scientists have found themselves at odds with their hierarchs on these very same issues. For a faith that does not deny science or scientific learning, the Orthodox Church has shown herself to be remarkably opposed to science in the Covid crisis.

The fact that there have been few reprimands for clergy who use multiple spoons to distribute holy communion (even in opposition to the bishop) suggests that at least some hierarchs

believe disobeying their directions is acceptable. Clearly there is a “public face” that the Church feels it must show, and if the reality in the parishes is different, then that is accepted as long as it is not proclaimed aloud. In my opinion this is a dangerous state for a church that is meant to expound truth and proclaim the gospel to all people. What is the litmus test for determining what must be expressed and practiced by the Church if not truth? Is it about being conservative or pleasing particular political forces, or even just doing what everyone else is doing? We are in a situation where the stakes are high. Lives are at stake, and not just the lives of the people who attend church, but those of everyone with whom they make contact during the following two weeks. If this fact does not lead the Church to a reality check, what will?

The puzzle remains, and it is not clear why collectively the decisions made by the hierarchs have been so consistently opposed to science. What does this all say about our church and its understanding of its place in the world?

Widely publicized comments that Covid is like influenza or that experiencing it is like having a cold are simply false. As in all viral disease situations, some people are only carriers and experience few symptoms but transmit the virus to others. In other situations, a person who is infected becomes ill and can die as a result. Right now it is impossible to predict who is most susceptible to serious infection, except to note that those with serious comorbidities are at increased risk of developing severe disease. This is an infection that recognizes no age, no nationality, and no level of income. Until science develops a vaccine or a cure, the Church must learn to respond in new ways: caring for our communities, caring for those in vulnerable situations, reaching out to those in need of emotional and physical support, and more.

We also all need to do some soul-searching. Have we done the best we can do for our parishes, our nation, our world during this time? Have we done everything we can to protect the “other” (the poor, the elderly, the lonely) during this time? What more can be done? What more should be done? ✱



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