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“Covid Theology,” or the “Significant Storm” of the Coronavirus Pandemic

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The article examines various theological aspects of the perception of the coronavirus pandemic in global Orthodoxy and the Russian Orthodox Church. Among other aspects, it touches upon issues pertaining to the celebration and distribution of the Eucharist under hygienic restrictions. It also explores Christological arguments in support of each practice. The article proposes some specific interpretations of the phenomenology and aetiology of the so-called Covid dissidence. It argues that artificial ideological polarization between so-called “liberals” and “conservatives” is why many bishops, priests, and laypeople in the Russian Orthodox Church mistrust the quarantine measures.

Keywords: Eucharistic ecclesiology, Christology, agape, COVID-19, culture wars.

IN 1971 Archpriest Alexander Schmemmann published the programmatic article “A Significant Storm: A Few Thoughts on Autocephaly, Church Tradition and Ecclesiology” in the *Herald of the Russian Patriarchal Exarchate* (Schmemmann 1971). When the Russian Orthodox Church granted the Orthodox Church in America autocephaly in 1970, Father Alexander considered this a new opportunity for Orthodox churches to rethink Orthodox tradition in the realities of our time. For him, this event marked “one of the most significant crises in the Orthodox Church history of recent centuries” (Schmemmann 1971, 550). Exactly fifty years later, the global coronavirus pandemic provoked an even larger debate that has forced theologians to reflect on tradition and ecclesiology.

The coronavirus pandemic, which will also be referred to as Covid, has caused confusion in local Orthodox churches. Many hierarchs and

clerics either do not know what to tell their flock about the risks associated with the disease, or do not dare to do so. Quite a few have already contracted the virus and some have died. Nonetheless, the pandemic has provoked productive discussions about the development of Orthodox theology. New theological and ethical ideas are emerging, and the Church is rethinking established ideas.

Ecclesiology is the most promising discipline to crystalize new theological concepts, as it is young and flexible. Formed in the nineteenth century, it has inspired debate on the relationship between Church and State as well as ecclesiological and theological primacy.¹ Ecclesiology responds quickly to the challenges of the time and is therefore a suitable platform for discussions about the coronavirus pandemic. Nevertheless, there are still few ecclesiological reflections on the pandemic.

Most theological reactions to the crisis focus on the transmissibility of Covid through the Eucharistic Gifts. For some, this is impossible *a priori*; ardent advocates of this position include certain hierarchs and theologians who have a reputation for guarding the tradition. Among the official Church institutions, the Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece is perhaps the most consistent and verbose in upholding this point of view. For example, on March 9, 2020 it published an official communiqué stating the following:

For Church members, the Eucharist and Communion from the Common Chalice of Life, of course, cannot be the cause of contagion. The faithful know that taking Holy Communion, even in the midst of a pandemic, is a practical confirmation of self-giving to the Living God, and a manifestation of love that overcomes all human fear: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Members of the Church know that the sacrament, which is a form of interpersonal relationship, is the fruit of love and freedom precisely because it has no suspicion, doubt, or fear (I Kathimerini 2020).

Positions like this are fideistic, that is, they appeal exclusively to the postulates of faith (Penelhum 2010). In some cases, fideists try to appeal to scientific data. For example, John (Tassias), the Metropolitan of Langada of the Orthodox Church of Greece, made the following statement:

1. I analyze the emergence of modern ecclesiology in more detail in Hovorun 2015, 79-94.

There are no germs in the sacred chalice and on the sacred diskos because, even if we look at it from a worldly point of view and in accordance with the laws of physics, viruses are nonresistant to alcohol, and the ions contained in the gold and silver sacred utensils deactivate any microbes (Flas.gr 2020).

Indeed, science recognizes the effectiveness of gold, and especially silver, against some bacteria, but not against viruses.² Relying on the metaphysical cleanliness of sacred vessels in the fight against the coronavirus is essentially the same as using antibiotics to kill a virus — ineffectual. While Metropolitan John did not differentiate between these germs, and ultimately succumbed to the virus on November 15, 2020, this distinction is fundamental for understanding Covid and attitudes towards Eucharistic hygiene.

Currently, fideists do not have significant theological or scientific reflections on the Eucharist's immunity to the coronavirus. The debate is even more perplexing when it comes to Orthodox fundamentalists — they accuse all who doubt the invulnerability of the Eucharist of unbelief and apostasy.

Fundamentalists often advocate “Covid dissidence,” which is consonant with widespread conspiracy theories in secular society, according to which the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was artificially created to inspire fear, restrict freedom, and strengthen the power of an imaginary “world government behind the scenes.” Covid dissidents consider the danger of the virus to be greatly exaggerated, do not take hygienic measures against its spread, and ridicule those who do. The public statement of Metropolitan Onufrii Berezovskii, the Primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), is one example of such a dismissive attitude:

Everyone falls ill at some point. Someone gets sick and recovers, then somebody else gets sick, but this is life. People often catch a cold when the season changes, but now everyone immediately suspects the coronavirus. Your leg hurts, your ear hurts — it must be the coronavirus (Rebrina 2020).

2. I am grateful to Gayle Woloschak, professor of microbiology at Northwestern University in Chicago, for confirming my findings on this matter. In this regard, the Associated Press denied the claim that silver could somehow influence the spread of the coronavirus. See Dupuy 2010.

Many Orthodox Covid dissidents and fideists have a rudimentary “covid theology”; they are so confident in their beliefs that they care little about theological arguments in support of their theses. Those who assert the risks of Covid with theological arguments do much better. This group of theologians could be called Eucharistic realists, since they believe that the reality of the Eucharistic Body and Blood of Christ presupposes that the Eucharistic Gifts are subject to physical laws and therefore capable of transmitting infection.

The realists’ theological publications are quite extensive. They include the collection “Church in a Pandemic,” published under the editorship of Petros Vasiliadis, professor at the University of Thessaloniki (Panos 2020), and a number of important publications on the Public Orthodoxy blog, edited by George Demacopoulos and Aristotle Papanikolaou of the Center for Orthodox Christian Studies at Fordham University (publicorthodoxy.org).³ In this blog, I published the article “Covid-19 and Christian (?) Dualism” (Hovorun 2020), which contends that the virus is part of God’s creation and is included in his universal plan of salvation through *recapitulatio* in Christ.⁴ From this perspective, the virus is not evil, and such a view would, in fact, be dualistic and contrary to the Orthodox worldview. As part of God’s creation, the coronavirus can freely reside in the Eucharistic Gifts and be transmitted to humans.

According to Eucharistic realists, fideism borders on magic. In various publications and on social networks, realists criticize fideism for its empirical and theological shortcomings. The main empirical argument is that the Eucharistic Gifts are not magical substances that destroy infection but are subject to the same laws of the physical world. To think otherwise is to accept a docetic position, which views the human nature of Christ as separate from the framework and laws of the material world. Throughout history, the Eucharist has been a vehicle for viral transmission, and the Church has taken sanitary measures against the spread of infection through the chalice. It also requires

3. Among the thematic publications in this blog, the following can be noted: “The value of the concept of “nothing.” Lessons from Covid-19 on Silence and Peace ”by Deacon John Chrysavgis, “ God, Evil, and Covid-19 ”by Prof. Pavel Gavriljuk, “Ready for the Covid Vaccine? An Orthodox Perspective ”prof. Gail Voloschak, “Reflection on Faith and Science in Light of Covid-19” and “The Eucharist, Its Physical Elements, and Molecular Biology” by Hermine Nedeleescu. All of these authors, some of whom are biological scientists, can be attributed to the group of Eucharistic realists.
4. *Recapitulatio* – the reunification of the world with God through the Incarnation. The apostle Paul used the term *recapitulatio*, or ἀνακεφαλαίωσις, in Ephesians 1:10. On this basis, see St. Irenaeus of Lyons 1969.

clergymen to protect sacred vessels from mold, and thus implicitly recognizes the possibility of infection through Communion.

The theological problems associated with the Eucharist are also related to the Incarnation. Starting in the fifth century, Christological disputes about Christ's human nature provoked the first discussions about the Eucharist, which include the writings of the main Christological authority of the Orthodox Church, St. Cyril of Alexandria. Now during the pandemic, disputes about the Eucharist develop into disputes about the Incarnation. For example, Eucharistic fideists consider the Eucharistic Body equivalent to Christ's Body after the resurrection; it is, therefore, not subject to decay and cannot transmit illness.

The fideists object that the Eucharist is a continuation of the Last Supper with the disciples, before Christ's Body was resurrected. One may ask them, however, if Christ's Body did not obey any physical laws after the resurrection, then how did the wounds from the crucifixion remain on it (see Moss 2019)? Furthermore, how could Christ eat fish and honey (Luke 24:42), if there were no microorganisms in his Body to help digest food? If the resurrection did not destroy the Bifidobacteria in Christ's Body, then what prevents bacteria and viruses from being in the Eucharist?

If one accepts the fideists' claim that the Eucharist is incorruptible because it is identical with the Body of Christ after the resurrection, then the salvation of the human race is in question, since Christ's humanity was flawed before his resurrection. According to classical Eastern Christology, such claims come dangerously close to heresy. For Eucharistic realists, the possibility of infectious transmission through the Eucharist is evidence of the identity of this Body with the Body of Christ, both before and after the resurrection. For St. Cyril of Alexandria, the wounds in Christ's resurrected Body were connected with his pre-resurrection body: "By showing his wounded side and the nail marks, he convinced us, beyond any doubt, that he had erected a temple to his body — the very body that hung on the cross" (Elowsky 2007, 357).

For Eucharistic realists, the fideistic position has a Christological parallel not with the Orthodox teaching, but with the Aphantodocetes, a doctrine formulated by Julian of Halicarnassus that arose within the anti-Chalcedonian party at the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries (Hovorun 2008, 28-9). According to this teaching, Christ's humanity was not subject to corruption. Hence the name of the heresy "aphantodocetism," that is, that the human nature of Christ is not subject to any corruption. Julian proceeded from the

premise, common to all anti-Chalcedonians, that the divinity and humanity of Christ are one nature. He concluded that divinity and humanity have common properties, including incorruptibility. The anti-Chalcedonian theologians and supporters, such as Severus of Antioch, disagreed with Julian on this issue. John Damascene, who represented the Chalcedonian position, defined apthartodocetism as follows:

Apthartodocetes, from Julian of Halicarnassus and Gaianus of Alexandria, are also called Gaianites. In almost all respects, they agree with the followers of Severus, but they recognize the difference in the unity of Christ and teach that his body was incorruptible from its very formation. On the one hand, they confess that the Lord suffered — with hunger, thirst, and fatigue — and on the other, they say that He did not suffer in the same way as we do. For we endure suffering by natural necessity, while Christ endured it voluntarily and was not a slave to the laws of nature (Damascenus 1981, 22).

The latter phrase accurately characterizes Eucharistic fideism in that the laws of nature do not apply to the Eucharistic Body of Christ. Modern Eucharistic fideists, therefore, proceed from an Apthartodocetic rather than an Orthodox premise. For them, the position that the Eucharistic Gifts are subject to decay contradicts the empirical experience of the Church.

Nevertheless, contemporary theoretical discussions of the Eucharist have not yet addressed fundamental Christological issues. At the same time, it is obvious that an acceptable synthesis between realistic and fideistic positions is impossible without including Christological issues in the discussion. The solution to these theoretical problems could resolve practical issues, which are given special attention in the Orthodox environment.

One of these issues was the possibility of performing the sacraments, above all the Eucharist, online. The Russian Orthodox Church hierarchy permits the use of modern communication to perform the sacrament of confession. For example, in his response to the question “How will confession be received now — via Skype with the priest?” Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Volokolamsk answered:

If you want to confess, make an appointment with the priest — he will receive you on an individual basis. You will be able to talk to him, ask him questions, and give confession. I think that in exceptional situations it is possible to confess via phone or Skype. But, again, negotiate with

the priest. Confession is brought to God, but it is accepted by a specific priest (Portal “Jesus” 2020).

In another interview, Metropolitan Hilarion compared the online Liturgy to “magic healing”: Representatives of the older generation probably remember the so-called “magic healers”: “Kashpirovskii and Chumak charged water, and people put it in front of their TV screens and then somehow used it. The Church condemns all such magical practices” (Official site of the Moscow Patriarchate 2020b).

For Metropolitan Hilarion, this practice became another excuse for condemning the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, some of whose clergy actually tried to celebrate the Liturgy online. On the Ukrainian Internet, such attempts have provoked a lively and constructive discussion. It began when priest Igor Savva, who had transferred from the UOC-MP to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), posted on his Facebook page that he performed the Liturgy online:

Since the beginning of the quarantine, we have been performing the liturgy online. To compensate for the lack of Communion, we discuss spiritual communion (after all, it is actually non-material), and try to deliver the Gifts to parishioners, but this is not always possible nor available to everyone. All this time, I’ve been thinking, why can’t we conduct the entire liturgy online? We pray that this bread and wine will become the Body and Blood of Christ and provide us communion with Him so that we will become His Body. Doesn’t this prayer “work” at a distance? Are radio waves (WiFi) or the use of gadgets an obstacle to our unification with Christ, His life-giving Body and Blood?

Last Saturday Fr. Dmitry Vaisburd and I had the amazing experience of serving a full-fledged liturgy with Communion using the Hangouts video conferencing program. Each of the worshipers prepared bread, wine, and water in front of the monitor. I performed the liturgy of John Chrysostom, as we took turns reading and singing parts of the succession. The consecration of the Gifts took place in the same way as during the divine service in the church. All participants received the Holy Communion, each in his own home. It was an amazing and inspiring service (Savva 2020).

Predictably, the OCU leadership did not approve, and other clerics raised theological arguments against an “online Eucharist.” In his article “What’s Wrong with Online Communion?,” well-known liturgist

Archpriest Andriy Dudchenko acknowledges that Father Igor’s initiative actualizes the need for believers’ conscious participation in the sacraments. He also notes, however, that parishioners’ physical presence and interaction is just as important to the liturgy:

The Liturgy is not a “technical means” for the consecration of bread and wine, so to speak, to obtain a material shrine through which one can then be consecrated. There is fellowship, community, and unity when all participants partake of the one Body and Blood of Christ. It is not only the taking of Communion that is important, but everything that the community experiences together during the service. There is a lack of physical presence in online ministry. We know that during the service, less than half of the information is transmitted orally, most is nonverbal. Movements, gestures, facial expressions, intonation, clothing, incense, and distance matter. The liturgy can be compared to a dance. How does one orchestrate a dance via videoconference (Dudchenko 2020)?

As an alternative to the “online Eucharist,” there is talk of reviving the ancient practice of “agape,” or “love feasts,” which were often practiced in the ancient Church alongside the Eucharist (Al-Suadi and Smit, eds. 2019, 189; McGowan 1997; McGowan 2004). Priests began to perform agapes online during the pandemic. For instance, myself and the nun Vassa (Larina) performed agapes on Zoom (Cyril Hovorun [YouTube Channel] 2020).⁵ As a liturgical specialist, Vassa adapted the agape structure for performance online. Below is the liturgy in full:

Friday, April 24, 2020, 10:00 am New York time (EDT); 7:00 am California time (PDT); and 3:00 pm Vienna time (CET).

Host:

- Greetings. “Welcome. Christ is Risen!”

Guests:

- Responsive greetings.

The host:

- “We gather for this agape on the eve of St. Thomas’s week in memory of our Lord Jesus Christ, His coming to His disciples “despite the closed doors,” and confirmation of Thomas’s faith. We are also gathered to confirm our love for one another in Him.”

5. “Online Agape hosted by Sr Vassa”, *Cyril Hovorun Youtube Channel*, 25.04.2020 <https://tinyurl.com/y2ojq269>, accessed on 23.11.2020.

- Seeking forgiveness and teaching peace: “Forgive me, my friends, for my sins that could disturb our peace and love in Christ. Peace to you!”
- Guests (all together):
- “Peace to you, Father N!”
- One of the guests:
- “Today we are reading a passage from the Gospel of John 20: 19-31.”
- Reading Scripture.
- Guests and host:
- Share thoughts on what they have read.
- The host:
- “Let’s pray together, as the Lord taught us to pray.”
- Guests (all together):
- Read the Lord’s Prayer.
- The host:
- “Father N, could you bless our food?”
- Everyone is holding bread and red wine in front of a computer camera.
- Father N:
- “Christ God, bless this food and drink for Your servants, for You are holy now and forever and ever.”
- Everyone:
- “Amen!”
- Everyone eats and talks (Cyril Hovorun [YouTube Channel] 2020).

In March 2020, quarantine laws forced churches to close, contributing to the dilemma of how to give the Eucharistic Gifts to believers. In some congregations, priests allowed trusted members of the community to take particles of the Eucharistic Gifts home with them and receive Communion there. This practice, however, did not become widespread.

More common was the practice of delivering the Gifts in the church, but without using the liturgical spoon (*lzhitsa*). In such cases, priests carry the particles of the Eucharistic Body, saturated with the Eucharistic Blood, to the pulpit and then distribute them to parishioners. This innovation has spread throughout local Orthodox churches. Essentially, it marks a return to the ancient practice of Communion “by hand.” The 1996 study on Byzantine liturgical spoons by Father Robert Taft played an important role in justifying such practices for the laity (Taft 1996).

Vassa, a student of Robert Taft, gave a talk at the 24th Orientale Lumen conference held online in June 2020, and made an important observation about the practice of giving lay people the Eucharistic Gifts

with the help of a liturgical spoon. This practice can be viewed as a kind of “glue” that solidifies the Church hierarchy, as it symbolizes the power of the clergy over the laity. Indeed, the difference in the way the Eucharistic Gifts are presented to clergy and laity perpetuates stratification within the Church. When the cleric delivers the Gifts with the help of a liturgical spoon, he moves his hand from top to bottom, emphasizing the vertical relationship between the cleric and the laity. Accordingly, many in the Church perceived the democratic, horizontal change of taking Communion “by hand” as a threat to the existing structures of Church authority.

As a result of the pandemic, people questioned traditional symbols and practices of the Church hierarchy. Hierarchs needed to perform divine services in a minimalist style — without subdeacons or deacons. Many celebrated liturgy according to the priestly order. Even the Moscow Patriarch, judging by the photo reports about his liturgical activity during the quarantine period, often served the liturgy alone.

The virus itself can be seen as the principal factor in the democratization of church life. Neither hierarchical positions nor the traditional privileges associated with them protect against the illness. Indeed, everyone faces the risk of getting sick and dying — patriarchs, bishops, priests, elders, monks, laity, righteous, and sinful. The virus thus created a powerful impetus for emancipation within the Church.

Among other things, the desire to maintain the hierarchical structures of the Church drives Covid dissidence. Another motivation for Covid dissidence is the perception of the virus as evil, which is inherently dualistic and Manichean. For many modern dualists, Covid has become a way to test and demonstrate their faith. Such ecclesiastical and spiritual authorities convince their flock that it is impossible to become infected with Covid if they have sufficient faith. This attitude is reminiscent of ancient “trials by ordeal,” or tests to determine right and wrong that included putting one’s hand into a boiling cauldron and fetching a ring or carrying red-hot iron in your hands, etc. . . Such forms of “godly violence” are discussed in a book by UCLA professor Alan Page Fiske and Northwestern University researcher Teija Shakti Rai (Fiske and Rai 2014). These tests could be invented by people or established in nature. In any case, the victim was considered guilty, and God himself confirmed their guilt.

For many modern Orthodox Christians, the coronavirus has become a sort of “trial by ordeal.” As the Archbishop of Novogradok and Slonim Gurii put it, “God permits us to be exposed to diseases and other calamities of earthly life for our sins. Sin is the cause of all man’s sor-

rows both in time and in Eternity” (Archbishop Guri of Novogradok and Slonim 2020). The former Metropolitan of Kiev Philaret (Denisenko) was even more specific about the causes of Covid. In an interview with one Ukrainian TV channel, he said: “An epidemic is God’s punishment for people’s sins. The coronavirus is caused by sinfulness. People do not openly defend what is good, but spread what is evil — I’m referring to same-sex marriage” (4 kanal 2020). From this point of view, if someone gets sick with Covid, the disease becomes a stigma which implies the guilt of the sick person. The fault lies not in the fact that someone did not follow hygiene standards, but in the fact that they did not believe or pray enough. In other words, for many Orthodox Christians, Covid has become a marker of spiritual inferiority, almost a curse. For this reason, many sick hierarchs, clergy, and monastics hide their infection. They are afraid to appear spiritually flawed in the eyes of believers and lose the authority and spiritual power they have cultivated for years. According to Robert Bartlett’s findings in his study *The Trial by Fire and Water*, hierarchs and priests established medieval “torture trials” as a way of exercising spiritual authority (Bartlett 1999, 36). The clerics themselves, as a rule, did not take such tests. Now, those who would judge others for contracting Covid but who could not pass the “torture test” themselves, carefully hide this fact.

In conclusion, ideological polarization between conventional “liberals” and “conservatives” also informs Church perspectives on Covid. The so-called culture wars, which have escalated within the Russian Orthodox Church in the last decade, are projected onto this topic. The Russian Church borrowed this polarization from American politics, where the split between liberal and conservative ideologies is primarily due to the bipartisan system (Prothero 2016). During Donald Trump’s presidency, this polarization reached unprecedented levels and contributed to the United States’ leading number of Covid cases and deaths; for many supporters of President Trump, hygienic measures against the spread of coronavirus were an attempt by the Democratic Party to impose liberal politics. This contributed to many Americans’ disregard for sanitary standards.

Something similar can be observed in the Russian Orthodox Church. For many of its members, including some among the episcopate and clergy, the ideological markers of “liberal” or “conservative” have become fundamental, even more important than the traditional identities of Christian or Orthodox. For many church members who view each other through the ideological bipolar lenses of liberalism and conservatism, the measures against Covid, and even the virus it-

self, seem to be nothing more than a liberal invention and an attempt to impose their values on everyone. Father Andrei Tkachev, one of the most popular preachers of ideological polarization within the Russian Orthodox Church and a passionate denouncer of “liberalism,” serves as an example of this. In March 2020, he went to the pulpit of a Moscow church wearing a respirator to ridicule those who wear the mask (Telekanal 360 2020). Later, he explained his decision:

I wanted to wear it, so what — it’s my decision. I think [wearing masks] is psychotic. I didn’t care though. You can all go mad, but I’m going to laugh at you.... Whoever wants to accuse me — let him blame me for my health, I won’t be offended. We have a lot of people dying from a variety of diseases every day. Why should I apologize? Did I come up with this coronavirus? It leaked from some military laboratory, let those who created it apologize (Gazeta.ru 2020).

The hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church in recent years has supported and sometimes even initiated both ideological polarization and fundamentalist sentiments among believers. In the era of Covid, both contributed to the faster and wider spread of coronavirus infections among members of the Church. And although the hierarchy itself is aware of the danger of Covid for the most part, it now cannot cope with skepticism, or even aggression among Church “conservatives” and fundamentalists over restrictive hygienic measures.

Despite the Covid crisis within the Russian Orthodox Church, the pandemic also contributes to the much-needed processes of catharsis and emancipation within the Church. Quarantine conditions and other health measures stimulate fruitful theological discussions that could ultimately accelerate the development of ecclesiology, Christology, and liturgical and pastoral theology.

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