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The Practice of Taking Communion Among Orthodox Parishioners in the Soviet Era

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This article uses the methods of historical anthropology to look at the evolution of practices associated with the Eucharist in the Russian Orthodox Church during the Soviet era. Beglov shows that during the Soviet period the frequency of individual communion increased by 5–10 times in comparison with the pre-revolutionary period, when most Orthodox Christians took communion no more than once a year. This evolution can be accounted for by exploring three processes associated with the rise of the USSR: 1) an “emancipation” of the ritual from functions related to state control; 2) the believers’ sense of existential fragility and insecurity under the new Soviet regime, which allowed for the same relaxation of pre-communion requirements that is permissible in the case of possibly imminent death; and 3) the blurring of the boundaries between the more intensive monastic practice and the ordinary lay practice that developed under the old regime.

Keywords: religious practices, history of everyday life, historical anthropology, the Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century, practice of Holy Communion, normative texts and practices, monasticism.

THE significance of communion is difficult to overestimate — it is the central sacrament of the Orthodox Church. But communion as a practice can display considerable variety in its historical manifestations and undergo significant changes in comparatively short

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spans of time. A key case in point is the frequency of communion considered appropriate by the laity of a particular community.¹ During the 20th century the practice under consideration here experienced two revolutions in this respect. Or, if it may be so expressed, two *Eucharistic transitions*: from the Synodal period to the Soviet (during the entire Soviet period the frequency with which Orthodox parishioners took communion grew by approximately five to ten times), and then to the post-Soviet period (it increased by another four to five times in the 1990s). In this article we will attempt to understand which factors brought about the first Eucharistic transition and single out several methodological points that would seem to be important for the study of the practice of communion and of religious practices in general.

Research into the practice of communion presents us with an unexpected problem with source material. Despite its significance for the Orthodox believer, taking communion is a silent practice, about which people rarely speak and which they even more rarely document in writing. Believers acquire the regularity with which they take communion from context and from custom, which is far from always substantiated and even more rarely interpreted. A custom is good because it is accepted — so it seems to its bearers — by all, and has always existed. Interestingly, believers in the 1970s, by their own admission, experienced surprise, or even shock, when they realized how much their own practice of communion differed from what was customary before the revolution (Interview with Shchipkov 2012). But for the researcher this creates additional difficulties, since the custom is rarely articulated. It leaves its traces as it were by happenstance and in passing, mostly in private sources such as diaries, letters, and memoirs. In the course of this investigation I will give paramount attention to these sources. Other major sources for this research were interviews, primarily with parishioners of well-known Moscow churches, about the situation with communion that existed in their communities in the 1970s and 1980s. These interviews comprise an important supplementary source for the research presented here. The state of the research into the available sources permits only a preliminary approach to this topic. One could speak more decisively

1. The practice of taking communion is accompanied by a whole complex of related practices. All together they can be called *Eucharistic practices* — the presence or absence of pre-communion confession; a Eucharistic fast and the practice of conjugal abstinence in connection with communion; pre- and post-communion prayers and church services that should be attended in connection with communion; the layperson's prayers during the Liturgy, and so on.

about the evolution of practice with a more thorough inventory of the material; however, I will attempt to outline the basic tendencies of this evolution.

In this I will concentrate on reviewing the practice only within the USSR. Among various groups in emigration that were genetically related to the Russian Church tradition, the practice of communion acquired its own particularities, but until the end of the Soviet period, it presumably could not influence the evolution of the practice in the USSR in any vital way. I will note some exceptions to this rule in this article.

On the other hand, the example of communion gives us the opportunity to examine a problem that is important for the study of religious practices in general, namely the problem of the relationship between a practice and the text that describes it (Panchenko 2000: 14–25). Usually the text (whether folkloric or normative) defines the practice, provides it with a rationale. But in the case of the practice of communion, we find ourselves in a more complex, more dynamic situation. Studying the practice of communion reveals the most unexpected variations in the mutual relationship between real practices and the texts that normalize them, and is therefore particularly interesting from a methodological perspective.

The fact is that in the Eastern Christian tradition (strangely enough) there is no foundational text as such that clearly and unambiguously regulates the frequency of taking communion. Well-known texts, including canonical ones, describe the practice of a particular time, or express a desire to change it, or create an ideal and then compare it with the existing practice, indicating that the real practice differed greatly even from the generally recognized ideal.

One of the most well known texts on this account is the 89th (93rd) canonical letter of Saint Basil the Great “To the Patrician Caesaria, on Taking the Sacrament.”

It is good and most wholesome every day to take the sacrament and to take the Holy Body and the Blood of Christ (...). Incidentally, [we] take the sacrament four times a sennight: on the Lord’s day, on Wednesday, on Friday, and on Saturday, also on other days, if there is the commemoration of some saint.

We note the structure of this pronouncement: St. Basil the Great initially speaks about an ideal, norm (“it is good to take communion every day”), and then speaks about the accepted practice of Caesaria’s

church, which differs from this ideal (“four times a week”). We should remember the structure of this pronouncement on taking communion. We will also encounter it in Russian material, in particular with Metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov). It turns out that readers were allowed to decide for themselves whether they would bring their practice to correspond with the ideal that was put down in these pronouncements. Other well-known texts formulate a necessary minimum for the regular taking of communion: at least once every three weeks; at least four times a year; at least once a year (*Prava i obiazannosti blagochinnogo prikhodskikh tserkvei* 1900: 1). However, the practice could deviate significantly from these injunctions and even their very appearance most likely testifies to the fact that the “lower limit” prescribed by these texts was regularly violated.

Thus, communion and the frequency with which it is taken — notwithstanding all its significance — is a surprisingly “free” practice, regulated by the canonical injunctions of the Eastern Christian Church to the smallest degree. Furthermore, communion can by no means be regarded as a monolithic practice in all historical periods. If in the canonical decrees of the ecumenical and significant local councils of the 4th-7th centuries the various Church groups — the bishops, the clergy, and the laity — were charged with the same requirements regarding their participation in the Sacrament,² by the time there was a Russian state, both in the medieval and the Synodal periods, no one would have even contemplated applying the same requirements and criteria to a priest, a layperson, and a monk. What could be called *different variants* of the practice of communion were formed, which could differ from each other significantly. First of all, the regular practice of taking communion and the practice of taking communion before death diverged greatly. Secondly, the practices of communion differed between the clergy, monastics and the laity. Thirdly, the practices of communion differed between the higher and lower social strata. The Synodal period provides us with examples of appreciable differentiation between these variants of communion practice. People might not take communion for years, but during an illness would take communion every six weeks; priests could take communion once a week, monks once a month, but laypeople only once a year;

2. See the 8th and 9th canons of the holy apostles; the 66th and 80th canons of the 6th Ecumenical Council; the 11th canon of the Council of Sardica; the 2nd canon of the Council of Antioch.

townspeople and members of the nobility could take communion twice a year, but peasants only once every few years.

Moreover, the believers of the Russian Empire were well-informed of the existence of different variants of communion practice: laypeople knew very well how often their parish priests took communion, and pilgrims were acquainted with the practice of taking communion in monasteries. Attitudes toward such differentiation within a single communion practice fell into two broad patterns. On the one hand, this differentiation could be understood as the norm, as what separates and what should separate a priest and a monk from a layperson (Makarova 2001). It seems that such a perception testifies to the presence of a deep consciousness of social position, in which more or less intimate contact with the sacred is perceived as a sort of social marker. On the other hand, all groups or some particular group could strive to overcome this divergence by taking the rhythm of priestly or monastic communion as an example. It seems that it is precisely this that we encounter with the example of Fr. John of Kronstadt, whose priestly communion practice was perceived as an example toward which everyone should strive precisely in its frequency. In any case, the existence of such different variants within a single practice was already creating tension between them and, consequently, the conditions for the practice's evolution.

Synodal Texts and Practices

In order to understand the changes that took place in the Soviet era, we must pause on the situation of the Synodal period, inasmuch as it is the jumping-off point for the evolution of communion practices in the 20th century. A feature of the Synodal period is the rather substantial attention afforded to the question of the frequency of communion in government legislation. The standard given by the Spiritual Regulation (of 1721), prescribing to laypeople mandatory yearly confession and communion, is well-known:

Every Christian must frequently, at least once a year, take the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. (...) Therefore, if that Christian shows that he has withdrawn from the Holy Communion, he thereby shows that he is not in the body of Christ, that is, he is not a member of the Church, but a schismatic. And this will be the best sign for recognizing him as a schismatic. Therefore, it befits bishops to watch assiduously and to command that the parish priests report (*donosili*) every year, who from

among their parishioners has not taken communion in the past year, who has not in the past two years, and who never has (PSZ (1), Vol.6 1830: No. 3718).

The legislation of Peter I repeated the injunctions of Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich on the obligations of at least yearly communion (PSZ (1), Vol.1 1830: No. 47; AAE Vol.4 1836: No. 115; PSZ (1) Vol.1 1830: No. 570),³ but beyond that (and that was its important distinction), it burdened church practice with the functions of state control, inasmuch as participation in the sacraments was supposed to separate the Orthodox from the Old Believers. Taking communion became a kind of yearly repeated investigatory experiment in the exposure of supposedly undercover Old Believers.

The Statutes (*ustav*) on the Ecclesiastical Consistories of 1841 and 1883 (articles 15 and 17) reiterated the standard of the Spiritual Regulation and laid upon the diocesan authorities the obligation to keep track of the yearly execution by the laity of their “Christian duty” of confession and communion. Not taking communion over the course of two to three years was classified by the Statutes as grounds for reporting such a case to a church hierarch, and then to the “civil authorities” (PSZ (2), Vol.16, Division 1, March 27, 1841, No. 14 409; PSZ (3), Vol.3, April 9, 1883, No. 1495). Yearly communion was therefore considered here as important evidence of the trustworthiness of the subjects of the Russian Empire.

The Church legislation of the time looked on the matter somewhat differently. Metropolitan Platon (Levshin), in his instructions to his archpriests from 1775 (reprinted with corrections in 1858), ordered the latter to see that the families of the clergy were taking communion at every fast, that is, four times a year; moreover, the archpriest should call the parishioners to the same standard.

The archpriest should take care that all the clergymen and church servitors, and their wives and children, along with the junior servitors and their families, and all the supernumeraries, yearly, and not only during Lent, but also as possible during all the other fasts, confess and take the Holy Sacrament (*Prava i obiazannosti blagochinnogo prikhodskikh tserkvei*: 9).

3. The laws are from October 25, 1650, March 10, 1660, and March 1, 1674, respectively (dates according to the Old Style calendar). I thank E.V. Beliakova for the third reference.

An archpriest visiting his churches should exhort the parishioners to confess and take of the Holy Sacrament during all four fasts, in accordance with their Christian duty, and to come to God's temple, especially on Sundays and feast days, leaving behind their labors, and to live honestly, in accordance with the Gospel commandments (*Prava i obiazannosti blagochinnogo prikhodskikh tserkvei*: 46).

Thus taking communion four times a year was formulated as an ideal not only for the family members of the clergy, that is, not only for the ecclesiastical order, but also for all laypeople. Metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov) raised the bar still higher in his famous Catechism:

The ancient Christians took communion every Sunday;⁴ but among current Christians, few have such purity of life that they are always prepared to take part in so great a sacrament. With a maternal voice, the Church calls those who are zealous for a devout life to confess before their spiritual fathers and partake of the Body and Blood of Christ four times a year or every month, and calls all to take communion once a year without fail (*Prostrannyi pravoslavnyi katekhizis Pravoslavnoi Kafolicheskoi Vostochnoi Tserkvi* 2006. Ch. 1, § 340).

Was the Moscow Metropolitan calling Orthodox laypeople to take communion frequently or rarely (in comparison with the practices of the time)? As we will see below, in this respect he was 100 years ahead of his time. The recommendation to take communion during every fast and even more often in the context of the Synodal period was a recommendation to increase the frequency of taking communion, that is, it did not reflect the tendency of the period toward yearly communion. We can arrive at this understanding by juxtaposing this text with contemporary practice.

In fact, the legislation of the 18th-19th centuries prescribed more frequent communion than was apparently accepted in the Russian Church practice of the previous period. Prior to Peter I, the laity — as can be inferred from the edicts of Aleksey Mikhailovich — took communion very rarely, possibly only once during their lifetimes, before death. The

4. This remark of Metropolitan Filaret is not in accordance with the text by Basil the Great, cited above. In all likelihood, the idea that the ancient Christians took communion every Sunday is an interpretation of the 80th canon of the 6th Ecumenical Council, which prescribes the excommunication of a layperson (and the expulsion of a clergyman from the clergy) who has not come to church and has not taken communion in the course of three Sundays without a valid reason.

new prescribed practice of more frequent communion was strictly regulated in secular legislation and was subordinated to the needs of the state and placed in the service of state interests. The outcome was the *enserfment of the Sacrament* by the government. Simultaneously, appeals and even injunctions from prominent hierarchs regarding the frequency of communion did not have as significant an influence on the practice of their congregations as the edicts of the civil powers.

The real practice of the Synodal era was closer to the government legislation than to the appeals of the hierarchs, and in certain classes of society, above all among the peasants, the practice of even less frequent communion that was characteristic of the pre-Petrine era continued.⁵ “They fasted twice a year,” says Pushkin of the Larin family (*Evgenii Onegin*, ch. II, stanza XXV), underscoring their patriarchal and traditionally pious lifestyle. Sixty years later the father of another writer would set down the same tendency in his diary. In seven years of living in Melekhovo, Pavel Egorovich Chekhov took communion nine times. In three of those years he took communion once (1892, 1897, 1898). In another three of those years he took communion twice (1894-1896). And one year (1893) he apparently did not take communion at all.⁶ His communion took place either before Christmas, usually on Christmas Eve, or during Lent — during the first week (once), on Lazarus Saturday (once), and most frequently of all on Maundy Thursday (three times) (*Melikhovskii letopisets* 1995: 42, 78, 98, 104, 128, 135, 168, 180, 225). Here we must keep in mind that Pavel Egorovich was distinguished by a particular, even if somewhat affected, piety, and that his practice of receiving communion was the practice of an emphatically pious layperson.

The peasantry (who made up the considerable majority of the Russian population) had a somewhat different attitude toward the frequency of communion. In a recent article, ethnographer Veronika Makarova has shown that yearly communion was combined with the presence among the peasantry of those who were called “*nedaroimtsy*,” that is, those who did not participate in the Sacrament due to

5. It seems that the fixation in the Spiritual Regulation on the necessity of at least yearly communion led to a certain perversion: yearly communion began to be perceived in everyday consciousness as necessary and sufficient both in the secular and in the church-liturgical sphere. Taking communion more frequently was possible, but not obligatory, and therefore in the majority of cases not necessary.
6. It is possible that he simply did not record it in his diary, since he was in Moscow for Christmas (*Melikhovskii letopisets*: 73), but that is unlikely considering the scrupulousness with which he kept his “chronicle.”

their notion of the necessity of observing a particular — one might say ritual — *purity* after communion.⁷ At the same time within the peasant milieu a large significance was placed on communion prior to death (Makarova 2011). Beyond that, in the opinion of the peasants, communion was “good” for 40 days, or six weeks; consequently, taking communion more frequently than that was considered blasphemy.⁸ Thus, among the peasantry the practice of very infrequent communion that existed in pre-Petrine Rus’ was partially preserved.

However, “*nedaroimstvo*” (the practice of the *nedaroimtsy*) was not only a rural phenomenon.⁹ In 1883 the Perm-based Society of St. Stephen of Perm made the special decision to draw up and publish for dissemination among the parishioners a “short and strong article against those who have not fasted for a long time.” The chairman of the society, Archpriest Evgenii Popov, substantiated the need to write such an article, saying:

I know very well through my services as a parish priest in many parishes and by my position as an archpriest in two districts that one *meets everywhere* among the Orthodox those who have not fasted for *five or ten years* (RGIA f. 1574, op. 2, d. 263, l. 1, 3. Emphasis my own. — A. B.).

This article was in fact drawn up. Moreover, it related and criticized the motives guiding those who refrained from the Sacrament. They made their case using the traditional reasoning of the *nedaroimtsy*:

7. Although the translator has judiciously chosen not to translate a word with no English equivalent and that consists of a combination of roots that does not lend itself to translation, “*nedaroimtsy*” might be roughly rendered in English as something like “those who do not receive the gifts,” and the abstract noun form, “*nedaroimstvo*,” as something like “not-receiving-the-gifts-ism.” — The editors.
8. A wide spectrum of post-communion restrictions existed in traditional peasant culture. Thus, “people who have taken the Sacrament should avoid conjugal relations, abusive language, arguments, strong drink, cursing, overindulgence in food, oversleeping, and excessive physical labor” (Makarova 2011). Observing these prohibitions was easier during Lent; therefore, as Makarova shows, in Rus’ the practice of taking communion at the beginning of Lent was already coming into being by the 16th century. We note that Pavel Chekhov took communion not only at the beginning, but also at the end of Lent, meaning that the peasant conception of the “period of validity” of communion was already irrelevant to him.
9. Due to the absence of definite data for the earlier period it is still difficult to say whether peasant conceptions and practices had extended to the urban classes by the end of the 19th century as a result of migration from the village to the town, or whether the “*nedaroimtsy*” had always existed among the townspeople just as they had among the peasantry.

And so you philosophize as you will—you judge that it is enough to take communion in a few years! You consider it excessive zealotry to receive Holy Communion during all four fasts of the year and even more so to do so outside of the fasts. You repeat after others like you, without any clear inner consciousness: “I am unworthy, I cannot be so strict” (...). On these pretexts some do not partake of Christ’s supper at all, as if they are more reverent toward it, as if they understand the importance of it better than all others, better even than the Church, which however allows you to partake of it after it has tested your spiritual state at confession (RGIA f. 1574, op. 2, d. 263, l. 4 ob. See also l. 5).

It is interesting that these priests from Perm considered it possible to call their parishioners not only to yearly communion, but to communion four times a year (RGIA f. 1574, op. 2, d. 263, l. 1 ob., 4 ob., 6), clearly relying on the *Instruction to Archpriests* and the *Catechism* of Metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov).

Thus, the Synodal situation, which was the jumping-off point for the development of the practice in the Soviet period, was characterized by the following features:

- The enserfment of the Sacrament on the part of the government.
- The differentiation of the Sacrament among different church groups (the laity, priests and monastics) and different social groups (in particular, among peasants and non-peasants).
- For the majority of laypeople a yearly or sometimes even more infrequent communion (as among the *nedaroiimtsy*) was the general rule. Yearly communion was to some extent also the norm, as we shall see below, in the early Soviet period.

The Early Soviet Period: The “Emancipation” of the Practice of Communion

The year 1917 brought the practice of communion first and foremost emancipation, liberation from the control functions ascribed to it by the government. Nadieszda Kizenko speaks of an analogous process with respect to the sacrament of confession (Kizenko 2012). The sacraments once again began to be perceived for themselves, and not as an attestation of loyalty to the regime. For some this meant a refusal to partake of the Sacrament. For some this made a reexamination of its frequency possible if not essential.

The extremity (predel’nost’) of believers’ existence during the Soviet era. Another circumstance made more frequent communion

truly necessary. Believers in Soviet Russia found themselves facing persecution and death, from hunger or from punitive actions. This extremity of their existence became a reason for more frequent communion, and beyond that for a relaxation of the requirements of preparation for the Sacrament.

Archpriest Georgy Shavel'sky testifies to what he had to witness in the two capitals at the end of 1917 and in 1918:

The persecution, with torture and constant sudden arrests and executions of believers, intensified the religious feelings of the latter to the highest degree; special all-night church services were required, during which each of those present would strive to make a confession of their sins and to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, in order to be cleansed and strengthened when meeting the coming day, in which torture and death could be awaiting them. In view of the multitude of those desiring this there could be no talk of private confession (Shavel'skii 1996: 605).

Testimonies exist to the fact that during the famine of 1921–22 Fr. Alexy Mechev gave communion to his parishioners at every liturgy at which they could be present.¹⁰ Archpriest Boris Nikolaev describes a mass communion during the Pskov “purge” of politically unreliable elements in April 1935:

[T]he people came pouring in in waves: in those days mass deportations were being carried out, and everyone rushed to prepare for communion before setting off forever for distant lands. On the Feast of the Annunciation communed 800 people, and on Palm Sunday 1100 (Komarov 2008: 179).¹¹

As we can see, the extremity of the existence of believers in Soviet Russia was one of the main factors influencing the increase in the frequency of communion. Here, it was as if the function of the regular practice merged with that of the pre-death “valediction.” People were

10. This was mentioned in a personal conversation with the well-known spiritual writer Archimandrite Sofronii (Sakharov; 1896–1993), the brother of whom, N. S. Sakharov, was an active member of the Mechev community (Report by S. V. Chapnin, 1992). Also compare the practice of daily communion existing in this community (Mechev 1997: 342–43, 350). See especially, Mechev 1997: 389 on communion in the famine years without a special fast, since “fasting was involuntary”.
11. In 1937, in Pskov, there were 55,184 inhabitants; that is, on Palm Sunday in 1935 approximately 2% of the population received communion in a single church. See: Poliakov, Zhiromskaia et al. 2007: 68.

preparing for death, and so the question of the necessary preparation receded into the background, the regularity increased, given that someone in deadly danger could be given communion every day. But there is also another point to consider.

The further erosion of the borders between the practices of communion of various social groups (soslovii) in the Church. In the post-revolutionary period the borders between the practices of communion among the laity, the priesthood, and the monastic orders were intensively eroding. We can see this new tendency in communing the laity emerging already in the practice of Fr. John of Kronstadt. As Nadieszda Kizenko has shown, his understanding of participation in the Eucharist as the most important condition for salvation and the practice of infrequent lay communion associated with the Synodal period aroused in the Kronstadt pastor a sharp sense of discrepancy. He was pained by the inconsistency in the practice of communion between a priest and a layperson, and he wanted to overcome this inconsistency (Kizenko 2006). Hence the appeal to his parishioners to take communion more frequently. Thus, in the practice of the Kronstadt pastor the “erosion” of the border between the communion practices of the clergy and the common people occurred. At the foundation of his activity in this regard lay the view, revolutionary for the Synodal mentality, that all groups in the Church could and should take communion identically, and that access to communion was not a marker of social status. The common people’s acknowledgement of Fr. John’s holiness legitimized this view in the eyes of the priesthood and the believers.

But at the turn of the 19th-20th centuries such a view was more the exception than the rule, the audacity of a single charismatic pastor. After the revolution the erosion of the borders between different versions of practice started to proceed much more intensively, the more so since it had already been sanctified by the authority of Fr. John.

It seems that the *convergence of the practices of communion between the laity and monastics* took place especially intensively in the Soviet period. Let us examine one particularly eloquent example. As is known, the persecution of the monasteries on the part of the Soviet authorities led practically to their complete closure on the territory of the USSR by the end of the 1920s. But this did not mean the disappearance of monasticism, which went out into the secular world while retaining monastic vows. As a consequence of this, contact

was stimulated between monks and laypeople, who very often turned out to be united within the framework of a single religious community.

Thus, in 1923 several spiritual fathers of the then well known Smolensk Icon of the Mother of God and St. Zosima (Sviato-Smolenskaia Zosimova) Hermitage moved to Moscow, to the Vysokopetrovsky Monastery (the only open church functioning as a parish church), where a large community formed around them. In the Zosimova Hermitage the following practice of communion was the norm: the novices and the monks who had been tonsured as rassophores took communion once a month, fulfilling the call of Metropolitan Filaret (Drozdov) to the “zealous”; those who had been tonsured as stavrophores – two or three times a month; those who had been tonsured into the Great Schema – every day or several times a week (moreover, the Zosimovites strove to take communion in the same way in prison). With the arrival of the Zosimovites at the Moscow parish church, the practice of taking communion every month, customary in the hermitage among novices and rassophore monks, gradually also spread among the laypeople, who were the spiritual children of these elders. The monastic tradition was literally carried into the secular world (The Nun Ignatiia 2001: 187, 323–24, 389; Arsenii (Zhadanovskii) 1995: 86, 91–92, 94–95).

The experience of the confessors of the former Zosimova Hermitage held particular significance both on the strength of their high authority and on the strength of the fact that their spiritual children – both those who were tonsured and those who were married – later took holy orders and became well known pastors themselves. For example, Archpriest Vladimir Smirnov, the spiritual son of schema-Archimandrite Ignaty (Lebedev), the abbot of the Vysokopetrovsky Monastery, was a priest in such a well-known center of post-war Moscow ecclesiastical life as the Church of Elijah the Prophet on Obydensky Alley (“Gore imeim serdtsa” 2004).

Thus the frequency of communion in the 1920s was marked by considerable variation. On the one hand, those who were not active parishioners were required as before to undergo at minimum yearly preparation for communion. The Pskov archpriest Boris Nikolaev recollected the recommendations the parish priest gave his mother, who had not taken communion (and perhaps had not been in church at all) in the course of seven years, during Lent of 1922: “At confession the priest prescribed her several prostrations and took her word to fast and take communion *yearly*” (Komarov 2008: 140. Emphasis

my own. — A. B.).¹² On the other hand, in the community of Fr. Alexy Mechev frequent, sometimes daily, communion was practiced (Mechev 1997: 342–3, 350, 389). Several enthusiasts of the Renovationist movement, such as Fr. Alexander Evert, also of Pskov, followed a similar pattern. At the end of the 1920s he gave communion to his parishioners at every service; that is, on Sundays and holidays after a general confession (Komarov 2008: 161).¹³ However, both the pastors of the Patriarchal Church and those among the Renovationists represented only a small part of communion practice.¹⁴ The practice of the majority was located somewhere in the middle. During Lent of 1926, the young Boris Nikolaev took communion *three times* in the Patriarchal Church: during the first week, during the fourth, and during Holy Week (Komarov 2008: 147). We encounter the same practice of triple communion during Lent (with a difference in the nuances) later, in the 1970s and 1980s in the circle of Fr. Dmitry Dudko (Interview with Shchipkov 2012). This was no longer the practice of a single communion at the end of a fast, as with Pavel Egorovich Chekhov, nor the peasant approach, according to which it was necessary to “keep” the communion over the course of 40 days, which meant that it made sense to take communion at the beginning of Lent. The situation had changed perceptibly.

The Post-War Period: Stabilization of Practice

After the war, the period of “turbulence” in communion practice ended. The extremes were smoothed out, but in comparison with the pre-revolutionary era we observe a noticeable increase in the frequency of communion: we hear more and more often about monthly or nearly monthly communion as the normal practice.

For example, Natalia Nikolaevna Sokolova, daughter of the well-known Church samizdat author N. E. Pestov, who was a schoolgirl in the 1940s and 1950s, took communion “about five or six times a

12. A similar practice in regard to this category of parishioner was preserved in the provinces in the post-war period as well (*Pravdoliubov* 2007).

13. “Confession was by the book” is what the memoirist says about the community; i.e., sins were enumerated according to a list from a publication or handwritten collection.

14. Memoirs have brought to us voices of the Moscow clergy who harshly denounced Fr. Alexy Mechev for his practice of communion. The future archpriest Boris Nikolaev speaks of the practice of Fr. Alexander Evert as an innovation in the Pskov of the time (Mechev 1997: 342; Komarov 2008: 161). Compare the wary attitude of the Renovationist leaders to the liturgical novelties of Fr. Vasily Adamenko (Damaskin 1992: 205).

year,” i.e., about *every two months* (Sokolova 1999: 37). Her husband, Fr. Vladimir Sokolov, communed his parishioners *monthly* in the 1970s (Interview with Beliakova 2011). The parishioners who joined the circle of Fr. Dmitry Dudko (and who lived moreover in various cities, not only Moscow) would take communion up to 10 times a year during the same period, and also in the 1980s. In the words of one of them, they took communion “*not every month, but gravitating toward once a month*” (Interview with Shchipkov 2012. Emphasis my own. — A. B.). At the same time, as previously noted, it was typical in Fr. Dmitry’s circle to take communion three times during the month and a half period of Lent: during the first week, the Week of the Adoration of the Cross (third week), and Holy Week. Analogously, the parishioners of the Church of Elijah the Prophet on Obydensky Alley took communion slightly less often than once a month (Interview with Kaleda 2011).¹⁵

The practice of taking communion in the parish of Fr. Dmitry Dudko was distinguished by its peculiarities. The fact is that after the priest’s banishment from Moscow, during his service in the village of Grebnevo, a significant portion of his congregation was made up of people from out of town who would visit their mentor with varying degrees of frequency. In addition, it was the custom for them to confess and take communion during every visit. Correspondingly, the regularity of their communion could vary: those who came once a month took communion once a month, while those who came more often would also take the Sacrament more often (Interview with Shchipkov 2012).

Fr. Alexander Men prescribed the frequency of his parishioners’ communion very individually. However, he also required that communion take place *no less than once a month* (Interview with Zhurinskaia 2011).

In the town of Kasimov (located in a remote corner of Ryazan Oblast) in the 1960s through the 1980s there existed a practice which, on the one hand, noticeably differed from that of the pre-revolutionary era (here they took communion five times a year instead of once), but, on the other hand, preserved the features of the traditional peasant conception of the “period of validity” of communion over the course of six weeks:

15. It is interesting that in the opinion of the Obydensky parishioners, the majority of Orthodox believers at that time took communion four times a year. (This corresponded partly, but only partly, with reality, as we will see in the example of Kasimov.) That is, the Obydensky practice was perceived by its participants as frequent communion.

In our places diligent Christians took communion every fast, twice during Lent, in the first week and Holy Week. The elderly and ill among them took the priest's blessing "not to end up outside of the six weeks," that is, to take communion every forty days. Naturally, communion was prepared for by a week of purification, including the fast (which intensified it); attendance at all church services (according to ability, of course); the reading of the Holy Writ and the works of the holy fathers, which helped try one's conscience; and as the conclusion — confession and the rule. Leniency was given to those who had not taken communion for a long time. They were told that they needed to take communion at least once a year (*Pravdoliubov* 2007).

According to the memoirs of the same priest, the authoritative monastic mentors, the spiritual fathers of the Glinsk Hermitage and the Pskov-Caves Monastery, recommended that laypeople take communion once a month and once every two weeks, respectively (*Pravdoliubov* 2007). It is worth noting that such a recommendation in and of itself is yet another example of the convergence of parish and monastic practices of taking communion.

During this period there were proponents of taking communion even more frequently than once a month. At the end of his life, according to the testimony of his daughter, N. E. Pestov had been taking communion every week "for a long time already" (Sokolova 1999: 364). In the 1970s there existed around Fr. Vsevolod Shpiller a tight group of his spiritual children who took communion every week or at least more frequently than once a month (Interview with Beliakova 2011).

What is likely the most vivid example of more frequent communion mentioned by many memoirists is the practice of Archimandrite Tavrion (Batozsky), the father confessor for the Transfiguration of the Savior (Spaso-Preobrazhenskaia) Women's Hermitage of the Riga Diocese in the 1970s. Fr. Tavrion suggested (and even required) that pilgrims take communion at every service during their stay at the convent. According to the recollections of one of the pilgrims, he and his companions took communion four times in the course of the five days they spent in Fr. Tavrion's hermitage. Interestingly, Fr. Tavrion based his practice on the otherness of the monastic life, saying more or less: "You're in a monastery; everything here is different, so take communion" (Interview with Kaleda 2011; interview with Beliakova 2011). Such frequent communion was perceived as an exception to the common course of things. A pilgrimage to a monastery is a departure

from everyday reality, even everyday church reality, and accordingly a departure from ordinary, “normal” practices.

The integration of communion practices and pilgrimage did not only occur in the case of visits to Archimandrite Tavrion. Among a portion of Moscow parishioners there existed the tradition of confessing and taking communion in the TrinitySt. Sergius Lavra during Lent (Interview with Beliakova 2011). The combined practices, communion during a pilgrimage and pilgrimage for the sake of communion, fulfilled their basic function — the communion of the layperson with the sacred; and a pilgrimage, a departure from the ordinary course of things, strengthened the sensation of such a communion. This would become particularly noticeable in the post-Soviet years in connection with the new surge of Orthodox pilgrimages. However, this issue, along with the *issue of the combination of practices* in general and in this specific case (that of *communion and pilgrimage*), has remained so far unexplored in scholarly research, although it appears to be exceptionally important.

Communion and the calendar. There is another issue that requires examination in its own right — the issue of the combination of the practice of communion and the church calendar. In the Russian ecclesiastical tradition, which continued on the whole through the Soviet period, the practice of communion was separate from church holidays. People took communion during fasts and on their name days, but typically not on another feast day.¹⁶ And even during fasts, for example, during Lent, people took communion not on Sundays, but rather on Saturdays or on Wednesdays or Fridays. Thus in the mid-1920s 12-year-old Boris Nikolaev took communion during Lent on weekdays (i.e., during one of the Liturgies of the Presanctified Gifts) or on the Saturdays of the first and fourth weeks and, most likely, on Maundy Thursday (Komarov 2008: 147).¹⁷

By the second half of the 1950s the picture had changed somewhat. A unique document — the church service journal of the Moscow Church of the Icon of the Mother of God “The Sign”

16. It is possible that this practice arose as a consequence of the idea that during a holiday it was impossible to “observe” or “keep” communion, that is, the ritual cleanliness that the traditional (peasant) consciousness required to be observed after taking the sacrament.

17. Such a conclusion suggests itself, inasmuch as in the context of his utterances “nedelia” does not mean “Sunday,” but rather “week.”

(Znameniia) in the Pereiaslavskaia neighborhood, which was kept by the church's prior Archpriest Kleonik Vakulovich (1891-1972) from 1954 to 1962, allows us to track the combination of tradition and new tendencies. This church, one of the few that was never closed, is located not far from Rizhsky Train Station, and therefore it was accessible not only to the inhabitants of Moscow, but also to the inhabitants of the greater Moscow area. In connection with this, the peculiarities of the practice of communion that were recorded by Fr. Kleonik can be considered to be characteristic as a whole for the Moscow Region.

The journal of the Church of the Sign (see Table 1) shows that believers, as before, rarely took communion on the day of a feast that did not correlate with a fast period. For example, on the days of the Great Feasts of Ascension and Pentecost in the Church of the Sign in 1957 there were only 100 communicants on each holiday. This was less than the average number of communicants on an ordinary Sunday (one not coinciding with the commemoration of a venerated saint or with another holiday), and also below the average number of communicants on the great feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul (230), which is less significant from the perspective of church regulations than the above-mentioned Great Feasts, but which completes the Peter and Paul fast period.

Table 1. The Daily Distribution of Communicants during the Ecclesiastical Year in the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God “The Sign” in the Pereiaslavskaia Neighborhood (Moscow) in 1956 and 1957 (Calculated according to Vakulovich 2011a: 208–244).

Types of Days in the Ecclesiastical Year	Number of Communicants	Average
	min/max (number of instances)	
Weekday	6/60 (16)	30
Weekday + Commemoration of a venerated saint	15/210 (11)	81
Sunday	50/170 (17)	122
Sunday + Commemoration of a venerated saint	150/600 (3)	316

Types of Days in the Ecclesiastical Year	Number of Communicants	
	min/max (number of instances)	Average
Lent + Weekday (Wednesday, Friday; Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday of Holy Week)	60/410 (24)	230
Lent + Weekday + Commemoration of a venerated saint	115/350 (3)	241
Lent + Sunday, Saturday	380/1500 (19)	880
Maundy Thursday	600/1500 (2)	1050

Orthodox parishioners strove as before to take communion on their name days. On the day of the commemoration of any venerated saint, and particularly that of a female saint whose name was a common female name, the number of communicants (they were more often female than male) outside of Lent grew by approximately 2.5 times in comparison with the average number of communicants on a weekday or a Sunday that did not coincide with the day of the commemoration of such a saint. Moreover, all the evidence suggests that on such days the vast majority of those taking communion were women celebrating their name days. Fr. Kleonik makes special mention of the fact that on the days commemorating saints Tatiana, Anastasia, Xenophon and Maria, Simeon and Anna, Evdokiia, Vera, Nadezhda, Liubov and Sofia there were in the church such-and-such a number of “lady-communicants” or “lady-communicants/name day celebrants” (Vakulovich 2011a: 297, 301, 304–06, 311, 319, 321, 325; Vakulovich 2011b: 228).

Alongside this, believers were now taking communion ever more frequently on Sundays. It is possible that they were pushed toward this by the fact that Sunday was a day off. During Lent, the number of communicants on Saturdays and Sundays frequently coincided now, and sometimes Sundays would outstrip Saturdays in the number of communicants (this happened, for example, during Lent of 1957). At the same time, Lent remained the chief time of year when Orthodox believers took communion. During this season the number of communicants outnumbered the scale of analogous days by 3–7 times. During Lent parishioners strove to take part in the Sacrament on the Saturday and Sunday of the first week and on Thursday and

Saturday of Holy Week more frequently than on other days. Moreover, in 1956 the number of communicants in the first week was more than double the number of communicants in Holy Week (1500 each day as opposed to 600). But in 1957 the first week and Holy Week were practically even in this respect (1250 communicants on the Saturday of the first week and 1500 on the Saturday of Holy Week). Two traditions of taking communion — at the beginning versus at the end of Lent — coexisted, and, apparently, were competing with each other during this period.

However, the apex of the ecclesiastical year, the feast of Easter, was still not associated with the laity taking communion. As a whole the Russian ecclesiastical tradition, apparently, was already a stranger to communion by the laity on this feast day during the 17th century.¹⁸ This situation remained throughout the Soviet period. But in the 1960s-70s there was a priest serving in Moscow who threw down a challenge to this fixed tradition. This was Fr. Vsevolod Shpiller, who began communing his regular parishioners on Easter and in this way stood out markedly from other Moscow rectors of that time (Interview with Beliakova 2011).¹⁹ It is likely that Fr. Vsevolod's practice can be explained by his service in emigration and his familiarity with the Eucharistic traditions of other Orthodox Churches. In the parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia the battle for communion during Easter had begun considerably earlier.

Let us compare the appeal of Archbishop Ioann (Maksimovich) of San Francisco relative to the 1940s-50s:

We pray beginning with our preparations for Lent and then many times during Lent: that the Lord may allow us to receive the Sacrament on the night of Holy Easter. (...) Of course it is necessary to fast ahead of time and, having already taken communion during Lent, to receive the Sacrament anew. Before the Paschal Liturgy there is no time for a detailed confession; this must be done earlier. And on this luminiferous night, we have received general permission to approach the Lamb of

18. Compare the description of communion during Easter in Jerusalem by Arseny Sukhanov, in which one can sense the shock felt by the Russian traveler (Sukhanov 1870: 93–94; reference suggested E. V. Beliakova).
19. Incidentally, other Moscow pastors, for example, Archpriest Vladimir Smirnov, were in agreement with Fr. Vsevolod regarding the possibility of communing the laity on Easter; however, the practice of the Church of Elijah on Obydensky Alley remained more conservative during that period (Smirnov 2004: 125).

God, the pledge of our Resurrection. May no one leave the Church prematurely, hurrying to taste the flesh of animals, instead of tasting the Most Pure Body and Blood of Christ (Archbishop Ioann (Maksimovich) 1991: 222–23).

This being said, it seems likely that the Russian practice abroad itself was influenced by the corresponding practice of other Orthodox Churches — the Serbian and Greek Churches, in which communion on Easter had never disappeared.

The prayers of laypeople during the Liturgy. Another aspect of the practice of communion that must be mentioned is connected with the ways in which a layperson may participate in liturgical prayer. Sources from the Soviet period give three different answers to this question: a layperson could 1) listen to or sing along with what the choir was singing, 2) read for themselves special prayers that were not related to the text of the Liturgy or were only indirectly connected with it, or 3) follow along with the prayers of the priest.

The practice corresponding with the first option was naturally the most widespread. The second and third options were encountered more rarely. Fr. Sergy Zheludkov testifies to the existence of the second option, which he regarded critically: “There were in the popular edifying literature publications that offered in this instance foul prayers of their own invention” (Zheludkov 2003: 134–5).²⁰ The hieromonk Fr. Sampson (Sivers) recommended that his followers use prayers that diverged from the text of the Liturgy (*Starets ieroskhimomonakh Sampson* 2004: 145–47).

But a third option also existed. It is known that Fr. Alexander Men recommended that his parishioners prepare small booklets — the Eucharistic Canon, printed on a typewriter. The size of the booklet was such that it would fit in the palm of one’s hand. This was necessary in order not to attract the attention of others nearby. The booklet was supposed to be used to follow along with the Liturgy, in order to understand the meaning of the intonements of the priest and the contents of the entire service. At the same time it was not intended for laypersons themselves to pronounce the priest’s secret prayers; the goal was to understand them and

20. It has not yet been possible to establish which publications specifically Fr. Sergy had in mind.

participate consciously in the priest's prayer (Interview with Zhurinskaia 2011).

This idea certainly came to Fr. Alexander through the reflections of Fr. Sergy Zheludkov, formulated in his 44th "Notes on Serving the Liturgy":

But what can we do today, what advice can we give to the conscious Christian today — how should he pray during the completion of the Eucharist? (...) They [the true prayers of the Eucharist] are printed in the Service Book. They should be copied out and read at a whisper or silently along with the priest. With such a practice they will quickly be memorized (Zheludkov 2003: 134–35).

Here we can see how samizdat texts had a direct influence on the Eucharistic practices of Orthodox parishioners. And although they did not change the frequency of communion, they introduced into Eucharistic practice a new, hitherto unknown element. This was not so much a question of more frequent communion as it was an attempt to achieve a more conscious attitude on the part of the parishioners toward the celebration of the Sacrament.

It appears that this practice should be examined in the context of the reflections, found among various church groups at the time, about the "universal priesthood" of Orthodox believers (compare 1 Peter 2:5, 9); about the equal participation of the laity in the Liturgy; about the fact that "Christ is among us not only in the altar, but in the whole church" (Personal Communication from Shchipkov 2012). Such discussions took place among Fr. Dmitry Dudko's parishioners in the 1970s (Personal Communication from Shchipkov 2012). It seems that this intuition was also not alien to the circle of Fr. Alexander Men.

Conclusion

Thus, we observe three important tendencies relevant to the Soviet period. Firstly, the Sacrament was "liberated" from the governmental control functions of the previous period, which created conditions for change in the practice of communion. Secondly, the extremism, the "on the verge of death" nature of human existence during the Soviet period became a stimulus for the practice to undergo such changes.

Thirdly and finally, the erosion of the borders between priestly and especially monastic practice of taking communion and that of the laity defined the direction of this evolution: the practices of different “versions,” which had formed during the Synodal period, gradually converged, and the common denominator of this convergence was the increase in the frequency of communion among the laity — an extremely significant increase in comparison with the previous period.

This “Eucharistic transition” of the Soviet period was conditioned not so much by the influence of new texts on the practice as it was by a change from within the practice itself. This change manifests itself precisely as an erasure of the boundaries between the different “versions”: the boundaries between regular communion and communion prior to death, and between communion by monastics and by the laity, became fluid. Communion with the sacred became essential, and the fear of it, so characteristic, for example, of pre-revolutionary peasant consciousness, gradually disappeared. Alongside that, regular, or, on the contrary, episodic contact with the sacred stopped being a social marker and began to be interpreted in its own religious context.

The erosion of the boundaries between social groups (*sosloviiami*) in the Church, the departure of monasticism into the world, and the disappearance of the clerical estate — which presupposed the elevation of priests from “the people,” from yesterday’s laity (and not from a hereditary clergy) — apparently represent another factor in the changing mentality. By the end of the Soviet period, a feeling was forming among certain groups of parishioners (especially among the urban youth) that in the language of theology all Orthodox Christians were designated part of a “universal priesthood.” This resulted in a strong desire for conscious participation in the prayer of the priest and, correspondingly, more frequent participation in the Sacrament.

In the post-Soviet period there was yet another radical metamorphosis in store for communion practice. The most important impulse for this was provided by texts written by émigré authors that were read in Russia at the turn of the 1980s-90s in the context of an already active tendency toward the convergence of different versions of the practice. But this is the subject for another research project.

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