

FROM THE CHANTER'S STAND

Gabriel Cremeens

With Faith and Love, Draw Near: Infectious Diseases and Holy Communion

A pious member of our parish recently asked the following question: “During flu season, should one not receive Communion, so as not to get others sick, or risk getting sick oneself? Is it possible to contract an infection or germs because of sharing the same spoon at Communion?”

The answer is an unequivocal “no” – an answer informed by faith, science, and history.

⇒ Faith ⇐

Let us begin with faith, and what our Church teaches about “the fountain of life and immortality,” Holy Communion:

Holy Communion is nothing less than the Body and Blood of Christ our God. In the words of one Orthodox writer:

Nothing harmful can be transmitted through Holy Communion by the grace of Him who said of those who believe in Him, ‘They shall tread on serpents and on scorpions, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them.’ (Luke 10:19)¹

The same Lord also said, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.” (John 6:53-54)

Would the same Lord who spoke these words, who enjoined us to eat His flesh and drink His blood, allow us to become sick from the very Communion which He commanded us to partake of? Consider the words spoken by the priest when we approach the chalice:

“The servant of God (name) receives the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, for healing of soul and body, and for life everlasting. Amen.”

At this moment, the priest is literally giving us the Body and Blood of God Himself – God Almighty, the Author of life and Creator “of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.” Let us not allow the devil, the enemy of our salvation, to cause us to fall into unbelief and fear. Rather than fear germs, let us fear instead for the state of our soul, and pray that we have prepared sufficiently through confession, fasting, and reconciliation with our neighbor.

At every Divine Liturgy, before communing the people, the priest cries out, “With the fear of God, faith, and love, draw near!” Let us take care that the devil does not cause us to replace the “fear of God” with the fear of bacteria and disease.

⇒ Science ⇐

We will now continue with science, mentioning some relevant facts. Consider first these words of Emanuel Kolyvas, a Greek Orthodox medical doctor from Montreal:

Contrary to popular opinion, wine, and other beverages of antiquity produced through fermentation, were probably more important in providing disease-free drinking fluids than in their tendency to intoxicate. Ancient Greeks drank their water mixed with wine, and also used wine to cleanse wounds and soak dressings. More recently, military physicians of the last century observed that during epidemics of cholera, wine drinkers were relatively spared by the disease, and troops were advised to mix wine into the water.

Wine has been shown to be an effective antiseptic even when the alcohol is removed. In fact, 10% alcohol is a poor antiseptic, and alcohol only becomes optimally effective at concentrations of 70%. The antiseptic substances in wine are inactive in fresh grapes because these molecules are bound to complex sugars. During fermentation these antiseptic substances are split off from the sugars and in this way become active. These molecules are polyphenols, a class of substances used in hospitals to disinfect surfaces and instruments. The polyphenol of wine

*has been shown to be some thirty-three times more powerful than the phenol used by Lister when he pioneered antiseptic surgery. In preparing communion, the hot water that is added to the wine will increase greatly the antiseptic effect of the polyphenols. Disinfection occurs more rapidly and more effectively at 45 degrees centigrade than at room temperature (22-25 degrees). Another contribution to the antiseptic effect comes from the silver, copper, zinc that make up the chalice itself, ensuring that microbes are unable to survive on its surface.*²

⇒ History ⇐

Finally, let us examine the history of our Church. For 2,000 years, the Orthodox faithful have been communing from a common cup – even in times past when much deadlier and more frightening diseases such as bubonic plague, tuberculosis, and so forth, were rampant. And yet, despite receiving Holy Communion from the same cup and the same spoon, the Orthodox faithful have never suffered from any of these diseases at a rate higher than anywhere else in the world. And, in fact, there is no evidence – in the entire history of our Church! – that illness or disease of any kind has ever been transmitted through Holy Communion. O. Noel Gill of the Public Health Laboratory Service Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre in London writes that “no episode of disease attributable to the shared communion cup has ever been reported. Currently available data do not provide any support for suggesting that the practice of sharing a common communion cup should be abandoned because it might spread infection.”³

Additionally, let us reflect on the fact that, after every Divine Liturgy, the priest consumes whatever Holy Communion remains in the chalice after the entire congregation has communed. At this point, the priest has placed the Communion spoon into the mouths of dozens upon dozens (perhaps even hundreds) of parishioners, and then back into the chalice again – and now he must consume the remaining Holy Gifts. Theoretically, priests would be exposed to – and should be contracting – every infectious disease imaginable! And yet, despite performing this action after every Divine Liturgy over the course of a lifetime, priests do not suffer from infectious diseases at a rate any higher than the

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rest of the population, when there should theoretically be a much higher death rate among clergy throughout history. And yet, empirically, this is simply not the case. Alexios, the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Atlanta, shares his own personal testimony in regard to this matter:

When I was younger and an archdeacon in Patras... almost every Saturday after the Divine Liturgy, we visited the nearby tuberculosis hospital to offer Holy Communion to those who were too ill to come to church. These poor people, before modern treatments and antibiotics, were extremely infectious. Yet neither I, nor my spiritual father, nor Father Christopher developed tuberculosis after consuming the Holy Gifts. Not only that, we never even got sick. This happened not merely once or twice, but repeatedly over the years. Father Christopher is still living (now in his 70s), and so am I...⁴

In fact, in the history of our Church, sometimes the opposite has happened. There is a well-known story⁵ of a priest and a deacon who went together to serve Liturgy for a group of very sick people suffering from a highly contagious, life-threatening disease – one which supposedly could be transmitted through their saliva when they received Communion. At the conclusion of the Liturgy, the priest and deacon went to consume the remaining Holy Communion. However, out of fear of being infected, the deacon refused to do so, even after the priest attempted to allay his fears. “Very well, my son,” the priest said, and proceeded to consume all of the remaining Holy Communion by himself. Within a short period of time, the deacon contracted the disease and died from it, while the priest, saved by his faith, remained in good health.

Continued on page 12

Continued from page 11

Allow me to close with the words of Metropolitan Nicholas Hatzinikolaou, a hierarch of the Church of Greece and highly-educated scientist with degrees in astrophysics, mechanical engineering, and biomedical engineering from Harvard and MIT:

Our life in Jesus Christ is nourished and sustained by our sacramental participation in his sanctifying, life-giving Body and Blood. Insofar as we dwell in His presence, fortified by the traditional faith of the Church, our communion will be not to our judgment or condemnation – nor to our physical detriment because of some transmitted disease. It will be to the healing of our soul and body as a ‘medicine of immortality,’ venerated and received as the ‘bread of heaven’ and source of eternal life. The problem is not the flu virus... it is actually the virus of irreverence and the microbe of disbelief. And the best vaccine is our frequent participation in the mystery of Holy Communion, with a clean conscience...⁶

Source Documents

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² Koyvas Emanuel, M.D. “Can You Get Ill from Taking the Communion Cup? A Physician’s Opinion,” *Canadian Orthodox Messenger*, Spring (1995).

³ Gill, O. Noel, “The Hazard of Infection from the Shared Communion Cup,” *Journal of Infection*, Vol. 16, Issue 1, January 1988, pp. 3-23.

⁴ Metropolitan Alexios, “Swine Flu in the Chalice?” Website: *Mystagogy Resource Center*, <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2009/09/swine0flu-in-chalice.html>. Accessed: 2/1/2019.

⁵ “The New Flu and Holy Communion,” reprinted in English July 24, 2009. [Original source: <http://vatopaidi.wordpress.com/2009/07/21/η-νεα-γριπη-η-θεια-κοινωνια/>]. Website: *Orthodox Outlet for Dogmatic Enquiries*, http://www.oodegr.com/english/koinwnia/koinwnika/Flu_and_Communion.htm. Accessed: 2/1/2019.

⁶ Metropolitan Nicholas Hatzinkolaou, “Spritual Encyclical 41: The Spreading of the Swine Flu Virus and the Mysteries of our Church,” reprinted in English August 2, 2009. Website: *Orthodox Outlet for Dogmatic Enquiries*, http://www.oodegr.com/english/koinwnia/koinwnika/Flu_and_Sacraments.htm. Accessed: 2/1/2019.