



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церквей

***Exploring Church in Mission
Communion in Crisis: The Church during the Covid-19 Pandemic***

**The Church as communion of faith, worship and life.
Ecclesiological challenges and antinomies during the pandemic
and health restrictions**

Dr Stavros Yangazoglou

In the Orthodox Tradition the Church is realised when the Divine Eucharist is offered “for the life of the world”. In this way, the Church becomes a charismatic community and a real witness of faith, love and hope to the world on its way to the Kingdom. The Church, therefore, does not constitute a mere community but must represent and charismatically witness to the life and experience in Christ through the communion of faith and sacramental worship - always in relation to the world and humanity. The health restrictions and the deprivation of worship and sacramental life imposed by the current pandemic pose a series of theological and mainly ecclesiological challenges for the identity of the Church, which is connected with the celebration of the Eucharist.

1. The Church and the Eucharist

The Church exists as the Body of Christ whenever believers gather to celebrate the Divine Eucharist. This, however, does not mean that its Eucharistic constitution is limited to a sacramental ritual. The whole faith, worship and life of the Church revolves around the Eucharist, before and after its celebration. The Church lives and moves in the context of a Eucharistic reception and transformation of the world.

After Pentecost, the Church always celebrates and invites its members to the sacrament of Christ through the Eucharist, despite any obstacles. Thus, the life and the way of the Church moves from Eucharist to Eucharist until it enters the infinite Eucharist of the Kingdom, according to the word of Christ, “I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.” (Matthew 26:29). While the Church cannot live without the Eucharistic life in Christ, some of its members, may - “for justified reasons”- abstain from the Eucharist for a period of time. Based on its liturgical and canonical tradition, the Church may recommend the non-participation of the faithful for a short period in the Eucharistic synaxis and



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церкве

***Exploring Church in Mission
Communion in Crisis: The Church during the Covid-19 Pandemic***

worship for extraordinary health reasons. However, with minimal and representative presence of clergy and people, as is always the case, the Church will

continue to celebrate the Eucharistic worship in Christ unhindered, in which many will participate in prayer, even from a distance.

2. The Divine Eucharist “behind closed doors” and without the participation of the whole flock

The celebration of the Eucharist “behind closed doors” can be done in exceptional circumstances, such as the most serious health crisis created by the coronavirus pandemic. This situation occurs with extreme ecclesiastical economy and on the condition that the people of God are represented by a few members of the local church community during the celebration of the Eucharist. This representative presence of the faithful is absolutely crucial and decisive. The Eucharistic synaxis of the Church cannot be established without the presence of God’s people. Otherwise, the true identity of the Church and of the Eucharist is altered. In the Eucharist, the life of the world itself is taken and is offered in prayer to God, in order to connect the Eucharistic and ascetic ethos with the life of God and then to transmit it to the world: “for the life of the world”.

In the present situation, priority is given to the loving attitude and respect and care for the gift of life, for the brothers and sisters, who may suffer from underlying diseases. Just as we take measures not to transmit a simpler flu virus or any other infectious disease, so here too a need emerges for preventive and safe measures to be taken. The fact that the coronavirus is spread through human contact both inside and outside the church, can only mobilise the pastoral responsibility and loving disposition of the church officials and its flock to take the necessary sanitary measures.

3. The “digital” Eucharistic communion

The thirst for communication and interpersonal relations between humans, but also the organic relationship of humanity with its natural environment, cannot be replaced by digital technology. In the Church, we still see God in the face of



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церкве

***Exploring Church in Mission
Communion in Crisis: The Church during the Covid-19 Pandemic***

our neighbour and not on a computer screen or television. Technology needs to serve humankind, not the other way around. Nothing in the world can replace humanity's living relationship with God and its living and physical communication with fellow humans, with rest of creation and

with history. The Eucharist, as a real relationship, movement, and process of the Church, requires the real presence of a community of people who praise and witness to God for the gift of existence and life, and the acceptance of the grace of the Holy Spirit in creation and in history to become the Body of Christ. The celebration of the Eucharist defines the very identity of the Church and cannot be replaced by any online gathering or television image. However, the pastoral act and ministry of the Church may well recruit and use the possibilities given by digital technology wisely.

4. The gathering “in the same place (*epi to auto*)” to celebrate the Eucharist

The gathering of the community of each local Church “in the same place” is a necessary condition for the celebration of the Eucharist. In fact, it is necessary to gather the whole body of the Church, that is, the clergy and the people. If circumstances dictate that the gathering take place with the least possible representation of the clergy and the people, this Eucharist nonetheless remains a complete and true expression of the Church. Until the sanitary measures are lifted, the majority of church members who are unable to participate due to the pandemic, participate in prayer, awaiting and looking forward to their full and real participation in the Eucharistic life of the Church.

5. Pastoral initiatives during the pandemic

The pandemic has made the issue of maintaining life and health the most obvious priority. Careful and proper observance of sanitary measures does not signify blind obedience to the regime nor to governmental orders aimed at restricting constitutional rights, individual and/or religious freedoms. By obeying the measures, we actively care for the preservation of the life of our fellows and of ourselves, and we express our love and respect for others by showing that we are responsible carriers of health and life and not of death.

Each local church community is in need of a series of pastoral initiatives and interventions, starting at parish level. Such actions could include online catechism meetings for various ages and a network for the ministry and support



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церкве

***Exploring Church in Mission
Communion in Crisis: The Church during the Covid-19 Pandemic***

of vulnerable people (food, care, psychological and social support, conversation, etc.). The Ecumenical Patriarchate, while developing the framework of pastoral treatment during the pandemic, launched a special series of rolling conferences with “The Pastoral Care of the Church in a time of Pandemic” as a general theme. The rich and interesting topic of the specialised speeches and, particularly, the exchange of experiences and pastoral practices by clergy and laity from all around the world - men as well as women - who take initiative and action for pastoral ministry in the field of health, shows a considerably active and creative way of dealing with the pandemic on the part of the church.

6. Proposals and solutions from the liturgical and pastoral tradition of the Church

The ancient liturgical Church tradition of celebrating and receiving the Holy Eucharist was varied. The transmission of the Eucharist has never been a matter of dogmatic accuracy or confessional correctness. For practical reasons, from the 11th and 12th century onwards, the Eastern Orthodox Church developed the present way of transmitting the Eucharist through the common spoon. Various local churches during the

pandemic have applied differing solutions inspired from the ancient liturgical tradition. In this context, special measures are mentioned that had to be taken by priests by necessity during the plague pandemic. These required the use of appropriate utensils for Holy Communion, which were then disinfected with vinegar (according to St. Nicodemus of Mount Athos, c. 1749-1809). In this broad spirit of liturgical and canonical tradition, local Orthodox churches now apply various liturgical practices. However, as the Church views its entire existence through the Eucharistic lens, the Liturgy continues even after the performance of the Divine Liturgy in its pastoral and social ministry to the world.

In some environments, the sanitary measures were not observed properly. This resulted not only in the propagation of the illness but also in the death of clergy, monks and lay people. At the same time, a sacramentalist theory emerged in various isolated settings that suggested that the coronavirus was not transmitted within the churches and that the Eucharist was the only proven and



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церквей

***Exploring Church in Mission
Communion in Crisis: The Church during the Covid-19 Pandemic***

objective vaccine against biological death. The Eucharist is not a thing (according to an objectified and sacramentalist approach), but a personal relationship of faith, love and hope with Christ within the Church community on its way to the Kingdom. Without personal faith and worthy participation, the sanctity of the Eucharist does not involve objective, miraculous and necessary divine grace. These approaches are sometimes not that far from being tempting conceptions of the Eucharist in a completely objective way. Nevertheless, when the Eucharist simply becomes an opportunistic means of ideological expression of faith, then fundamentalism and religious zealotism obscure the event of the Church. Throughout history, the Eucharist depicts and prevents the end, the *eschata* as an event of communion, life and prayer of a community. Therefore, the Eucharist does not work individually, magically, mechanically or sacramentally.

About the author: Stavros Yangazoglou is a graduate of the Faculty of Theology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He studied ecumenical theology at the Institut Oecuménique de Bossey, and medieval philosophy and theology at Fribourg in Switzerland. From 2005, he has been teaching systematic theology at the Hellenic Open University in Athens. In 2017, he was elected assistant professor of Dogmatics within the Department of Theology at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He is a member of the CEC Thematic Group Ecclesiology & Mission representing the Church of Greece.

References and suggestions for further reading

- Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas, “The Church without the Eucharist is no longer the Church”, A (Telephone) Conversation with Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas (March 23, 2020): <https://publicorthodoxy.org/2020/03/27/church-without-eucharist/>
- Correspondence of the Ecumenical Patriarch with Primate of other local Orthodox Churches regarding the way of distribution of the Eucharist:



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церкве

Exploring Church in Mission
Communion in Crisis: The Church during the Covid-19 Pandemic

<https://www.ecupatria.org/2020/06/02/correspondence-of-the-ecumenical-patriarch-with-primates-of-other-local-orthodox-churches-regarding-the-way-of-distribution-of-the-eucharist>.

- Vassiliadis, Petros, ed. *The Church in a Period of Pandemic: Can the Present Pandemic Crisis Become a Meaningful Storm for Renewal in Our Churches?* Thessaloniki: “Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou” CEMES Publications, 2020.
- Asproulis, Nikolaos and Wood, Nathaniel, eds., *Καιρός του Ποιήσαι: Η Ορθοδοξία ενώπιον της πανδημίας του κορωνοϊού*. Volos: Demetrias Publications, 2020.
- Hovorun, Cyril. “Covid-19, Eucharist, Christian (?) Dualism and the Deadly Orthodox Fundamentalism.” in *The Church in a Period of Pandemic: Can the Present Pandemic Crisis Become a Meaningful Storm for Renewal in Our Churches?* Edited by Petros Vassiliadis, 159-164. Thessaloniki: “Metropolitan Panteleimon Papageorgiou” CEMES Publications, 2020.
- Kosmidis, Nikos. “A Search for a Theology of Life, The Challenge of COVID-19 for Orthodox Ecclesiology and Religious Practices.” *The Ecumenical Review*, Volume 72, No 4, (October 2020): 624-635.