

PETROS VASSILIADIS - GEORGE DEMACOPOULOS (eds)

THE CHURCH IN A PERIOD OF PANDEMIC

CAN THE PRESENT PANDEMIC CRISIS BECOME A
MEANINGFUL STORM FOR RENEWAL IN OUR CHURCHES?



CEMES AND FORDHAM PUBLICATIONS

Chapter 18

COVID-19, EUCHARIST, CHRISTIAN (?) DUALISM AND THE DEADLY ORTHODOX FUNDAMENTALISM

V. Rev. Prof. Cyril Hovorun

In this contribution firstly I will try to explain what underpins the widely spread belief that the coronavirus cannot be transmitted through the communion of the holy Gifts, and secondly I will show that as a result of this belief, a more deadly virus than SARS-CoV-2, namely fundamentalism has spread to certain Orthodox constituencies.

The belief that the coronavirus cannot be transmitted through the communion of the holy Gifts, is based on the assumption that the Body and Blood of Christ constitute an absolute good, while the virus is an evil infection. Good, therefore, cannot transmit evil, but destroys it.

However, the virus is an infection only for us, and even not for all of us, because most people will get over it without even noticing it. Per se, this virus, as any micro- or macro-organism, is a part of God's creation. As a physical reality and a part of nature, the virus is ontologically "good", like any creature (see Gen 1:21). We consider floods, volcanoes, typhoons to be evil, but they are natural processes, and as such are not ontologically evil. The snakes and spiders that bite us are also deadly to us, but by their nature they are good.

Together with other viruses, bacteria, and other microorganisms, the SARS-CoV-2 is a part of the ecosystems created by God. I will not now go into the question whether these ecosystems have been created directly by God or emerged through the laws of evolution laid down by God. I'll just say that some parts of these ecosystems are helpful for us, and some are not. However, regardless of this, they are all a part of God's creation. Moreover, SARS-CoV-2, together with other creatures, is included in the "recapitulation" described by Paul in the Ephesians: "*To unite (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι) all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth*" (1:10). Maximus the Confessor explains this: "And He recapitulates all things in Himself, for it is owing to Him that all things exist and remain in existence, and it is from Him that all things came to be in

a certain way and for a certain reason.”¹ Not all things, which are to be recapitulated in Christ, are currently at peace with one another. Some of them kill each other: humans kill other organisms, including human ones, while some organisms, both macro- and micro-, including SARS-CoV-2, kill humans.

The resurrected Body of Christ was ontologically the same body as ours. According to St Athanasius of Alexandria, “the Word, since he was not able to die—for he was immortal—adopted a body able to die, that he might offer it as his own on behalf of all and as himself suffering for all.”² Because our bodies and the body of Christ fully participate in the common human nature, the same micro-organisms that live in our bodies lived in the body of Christ. There are no reasons to believe that they disappeared from his body after its resurrection. The difference of Christ’s body from our bodies is that those microorganisms could not kill him.

However, they can kill our body, because it is not yet risen. Moreover, they can be transmitted through the Eucharistic Body of Christ, because they are not ontological evil, but constitute a part of God’s creation. The same applies, for example, to penicillin. Priests know well: the Eucharistic Body of Christ can become moldy. But this mold is not corruption, which indeed does not apply to Christ’s humanity. That one is the corruption of sin and death. Penicillin is not sin or death, but a living organism, which by the way turned out to be life-giving for us. Once considered a “corruption”, the mold of penicillin turned out to be a life-giving antibiotic. Its ontological status has always been the same: good, as a part of God’s creation.

Now let us go back to those who believe that the virus cannot be transmitted through the Eucharist. Their mistake, firstly, is docetic, because, like ancient docetists, they believe that the Body of Christ is exempted from the laws of nature. A docetist text from the Nag Hammadi collection stated about the body of Christ: “*Jesus... ate and drank in a special way, without excreting his solids. He had such a great capacity for continence that the nourishment within him was not corrupted, for he did not experience corruption.*”³

The docetists, and later the Eutyrians, also believed that the humanity of Christ was ontologically different from ours, even though it *appeared* to be like ours. In fact, Christ’s humanity was no longer our human nature, but something else. Secondly, those who think so about the Eucharistic Body, fall

¹ In his *Ambiguum* 7.

² *On Incarnation* 20.

³ Valentinus, fr. 3.

into the mistake of Manichaeism. Manichaeism was a dualistic doctrine that divided the physical world into good and evil parts. A Manichaean psalm survived in Coptic in the Medinet Madi codex, states: “*When the Holy Spirit came he revealed to us the way of truth and taught us that there are two natures, that of light and that of darkness, separate one from the other from the beginning.*”⁴

Dualism holds that some parts of the world around us are substantially (ontologically) evil. Many imply that the coronavirus is such an evil. Therefore, they believe that it cannot be transmitted through the Divine Gifts in the Liturgy. Such a view, however, stems from either conscious or subconscious dualistic outlook.

Evil is not and cannot be embedded in nature, which is ontologically good. As Dionysius the Areopagite explained, “Evil has no place either amongst things that have being or things that have not... *Qua* evil it neither has being nor confers it... Evil is non-existent. Neither inherits evil in existent creatures.”⁵

Evil is rooted solely in human freedom: evil happens when human beings make wrong choices. Such a choice is to ignore the danger of infection. Perhaps the true evil turns out to be not the virus, but when a person, instead of showing love to the neighbor, chooses to disregard the laws of nature, and instead of staying home comes to the congregation and infects other people.

Different attitudes towards the Eucharist in the time of coronavirus pandemic became a new epiphenomenon of the ongoing Orthodox “cultural wars”. Those who believe or do not believe that the Eucharist kills viruses, have entrenched against each other and shoot with statements and declarations. I believe it is unhelpful to continue with this sort of culture wars, because the virus, regardless of what we believe about it, continues taking health and lives on both sides. As a gesture towards reconciliation, I suggest to follow the advice of the Russian theologian Vasily Bolotov and to consider all points of view on the Eucharist and the virus as *theologoumena*, i.e. a theological opinion, which has no mandatory authority but can be safely followed by faithful. Only if an Ecumenical Council decides which side is right, can we treat either of the two theological opinions as dogma. Before that, we could discuss the issue and express opinions, but as theological opinions only. I personally believe that Eucharist does not kill viruses and

⁴ Ps. 223.

⁵ *On Divine Names* 4.

earlier I expounded theological grounds for such belief. At the same time, I refrain from considering those who believe differently as heretics (even though I believe their views feature some dualism, which is widely spread in our church in different forms anyways).

What we as the Orthodox, however, cannot tolerate in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, is fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a sort of populism for the church. It is based on post-truth and conspiracy theories. Although it pretends to be pietistic, it is quite secular and secularizing. I would apply to fundamentalism the phrase once coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “cheap grace.” Fundamentalism is a cheap spirituality and a cheap substitute for genuine ecclesial mindset (ἐκκλησιαστικὸ φρόνημα). The circumstances of the COVID-19 epidemic demonstrate that fundamentalism not only corrupts minds and muddies faith but can also kill bodies. It is time to treat it as a virus—one which can be more dangerous than SARS-CoV-2. Fundamentalism is like dry grass through which the coronavirus is spreading in the Churches like wildfire. As a result, the hotbeds of fundamentalism have turned into the hotspots of the deadly disease. This can be observed not only in the Orthodox Church, but also in other religions and confessions. However, the Orthodox Church features some specific forms of corona-fundamentalism, which I will explore in what follows.

The alarm sounded when many or most of the monks and nuns in conservative monastic communities in Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus tested positive for COVID-19; many were hospitalized, and some died. Such monasteries as the Caves and St Iona in Kyiv, St Sergius near Moscow, Diveevo near Nizhny Novgorod in Russia, St Elizabeth in Belarus, and others became hotspots of the epidemic. Some of them, such as the Lavra of Pochaiv in Western Ukraine, caused entire towns to be locked down as pilgrims who had visited the monasteries spread the virus further. Outbreaks of the disease in the monasteries do not mean that all monks and nuns there are fundamentalists. Many of them are good and wise Christians who care about others and whose spirituality cannot be called cheap. Nevertheless, they become infected from their less wise brothers and sisters. Tragically, quite a few seminarians were forced to stay in those monasteries to help with singing and hierarchal services, and soon they became ill. They fell victim to unhealthy ideas of fundamentalists and to the carelessness of the seminaries’ leaders.

It is not a secret that fundamentalism, a minor movement in global Orthodoxy, has been gradually gaining ground in the majority of the local Churches in recent years. Its presence, for example, became a reason or

an excuse for some Churches not to show up at the Panorthodox Council in Crete in 2016. Some churches, the Ecumenical Patriarchate for instance, heroically try to resist it. Some cowardly yield to it. And some, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, venture to use it for their own purposes.

The Church leadership in Moscow is far from being fundamentalist. However, it early realized the promising potential of using fundamentalism to mobilize both individuals and the masses for its causes. For instance, after the death of Metropolitan Volodymyr of Kyiv, the new Primate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate Metropolitan Onufry clearly demonstrated signs of fundamentalism. Moscow used his sincere fundamentalist inclinations to tie him closer to Moscow and made him a battering ram against initiatives of other Churches. He became one of the most outspoken hierarchs of the Russian Church against the Panorthodox Council and against the Ecumenical Patriarchate, accusing the latter of “modernism”.

The leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate, in cooperation with the Kremlin, utilized fundamentalism to mobilize mass support for the Russian military campaigns against Ukraine. Some ideologists of Russian aggression and many Russian fighters in Ukraine are typical religious fundamentalists. After the Ecumenical Patriarchate granted autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, fundamentalism became the last resort of resistance to this autocephaly. When other arguments against the autocephaly, both theological and canonical, did not work, only artificially cultivated fundamentalism could keep the faithful of Moscow Patriarchate hating and stigmatizing the independent jurisdiction in Ukraine. Fundamentalism was a sort of virus which Moscow kept in a test tube and released when useful to attack others or defend itself.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, this virus escaped the test tube and backfired at those who had cultivated it. Nowadays the Orthodox fundamentalists in Russia accuse Patriarch Kirill and those bishops who issue reasonable warnings for people to be cautious, of betraying their faith. Many fundamentalists believe in conspiracy theories. At first they claimed that the US government or the assumed “global government” or both, in collaboration with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, attacked Russian Orthodox civilization and promoted Ukrainian autocephaly with no other goal in mind than undermining this civilization. Now they believe that the same players launched the virus attack against Russia to keep its churches closed down. They laughed at the Ecumenical Patriarchate for its early measures to protect

the faithful against the coronavirus which had just begun to spread. I read a Facebook post by a bishop from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate, who mocked Constantinople for that very reason. He was soon hospitalized with COVID-19 himself.

I am sure a similar situation exists in many other Orthodox churches who now have to pay for their flirtations with fundamentalism in the past. Now is the time to stop that flirtation. We have seen that fundamentalism kills, literally. It is time to unite the efforts to contain not only the coronavirus, but also the virus of fundamentalism.