



# THE DIOCESE OF THE SOUTH

Orthodox Church in America

P.O. Box 191109  
Dallas, TX 75219

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June 5, 2020

The Leavetaking of Ascension

To the Clergy and Monastics of the Diocese of the South,

The blessing of the Lord!

It is with great sadness that I have learned about the continued detrimental impact that the the so-called “Orthodox Ethos” website, which is sanctioned by no canonical jurisdiction to my knowledge, is having upon the spiritual wellbeing of the flock entrusted to my care. I am reminded of the words of our Lord, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Mt. 7:15) It takes so little effort to devour and destroy, while it is so very difficult to heal deep wounds of the soul. God forbid I stand by in silence!

I would *never* encourage censorship – we may read what we will. The articles on the “Orthodox Ethos” site are written by people that do no answer to me (though they will certainly answer to God). On balance, I offer to you not my words, but the letter of a “wise priest in the diocese” who is unfortunately facing the scandal of doubt, fear and anger provoked by “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Please use all or parts of this as you see fit in the care of your flock.

Be assured of my prayers for you all during this difficult time.

I am yours, in Christ,

+ALEXANDER

Archbishop of Dallas and the South

cc: Archimandrite Gerasim, Administrator of the Diocese of the South  
Archpriest Marcus Burch, Cancellor of the Diocese of the South



## A Letter of a Parish Priest to His Flock

I have waited a long time before writing anything specifically about our current situation because I am a simple parish priest, not an epidemiologist, not a theologian, and not a bishop. Therefore, I am, for the most part, unqualified to say too much about our current situation. Unfortunately, others who are at least as unqualified have not hesitated to speak their opinions, throwing around words like “heresy”, “blasphemy”, “untraditional”, and the like.

Recently a priest whose canonical status is not easily discerned has posted videos trying to provoke schism and disobedience to the bishops’ directives in the wake of the pandemic. In one of the recent videos he interviews a so-called “Elder” who repeatedly calls the pandemic a conspiracy of the Zionists, Kabbalists, and Masons, and cites highly suspect Internet stories as evidence. Misquoting the Scriptures and the Fathers, he encourages people to disobey their bishops because, he says, the bishops are acting uncanonically (and then proceeds to quote a canon completely out of context in support of his false opinion).

It really should not even be necessary to respond to this sort of silliness, as it might appear to give it more credence than is due. However, sadly, conversations with far too many priests in the past days have revealed that some of their parishioners are watching these videos, reading these blogs, and taking as Orthodox teaching and Tradition these delusional opinions. So, out of concern for those who might fall into this snare, I share the following.

All around the world Orthodox bishops in almost all of the Orthodox Churches have taken precautions to try to prevent the spread of the COVID virus. This has involved primarily social distancing, limiting attendance at divine services, and changes in the practice of receiving Holy Communion.

The changes in practice to receiving Holy Communion are not primarily out of fear that someone will get sick from the spoon or the Eucharist, but are aimed at trying to prevent government interference in the Church. From the very beginning Christians have sought to live at peace among their fellow citizens when at all possible, i.e. when the law of the government does not conflict with the law of God. Additionally, our bishop has said that while he “doesn’t know that the grain alcohol is necessary,” he would prefer we enact a temporary measure that will console those who (out of fear) might otherwise refrain from Communion during these extraordinary times (reference Larchet on the Pandemic: <https://orthodoxie.com/en/the-spiritual-origin-nature-and-meaning-of-the-current-pandemic-an-interview-with-jean-claude-larchet-by-orthodoxie-com/>). Why would we protest when this request was made by our bishop for the sake of his flock?

Many people, particularly online, often anonymously, are accusing the bishops - again, we are talking about almost every Orthodox bishop around the world – of everything from simply overreacting to blasphemy and heresy. The arguments of these people are, for the most part, reactionary and emotional, intending to generate anger and fear. And sadly, for many, this is precisely the result. So, let me just say a few things very simply.

As most of you probably know by now, for the most part, Orthodox Christians do not believe that you can get sick from receiving Holy Communion, nor are the bishops indicating implicitly or explicitly that you can. I say "for the most part" because we all are aware, no doubt, of Saint Paul's warning to the Corinthians that to receive the Body and Blood of Christ unworthily has caused some to be sick or even to die. This should tell us right away that to state categorically as some do that "you cannot get sick from Holy Communion" is wrong. Thus, our need to prepare for Holy Communion with confession, fasting, repentance, and prayers as we are taught.

Given that exception, however, we do not believe that you can get sick from Holy Communion. We have no scientific data behind this, even though some like to quote studies done in Protestant and Catholic churches over the past hundred years, but neither should we need or even want scientific data here.

However, some have taken this belief and incorrectly drawn the conclusion that you cannot get sick in church at all, from anything or anyone. Taking quotes from the fathers and saints completely out of context they have tried to argue that the church building and services are a "zone of incorruption" and that therefore someone could not get sick at all in church. The same so-called "Elder" mentioned above calls the idea that you might catch a cold from a fellow parishioner in church "blasphemy". It does not take much, though, to demonstrate that this view is false. Let me just give a couple of examples.

The precious Body and Blood of Christ, is instructive. In Great Lent, when preparing Communion for the Presanctified Liturgy, the priest must take care that the consecrated Lamb does not get moldy. Thus, he takes precautions to make sure it gets sufficient air to dry out. The consecrated Lamb which has become the Body of Christ and intincted with the Blood of Christ remains a physical reality of our world even as it is now not of this world. Likewise, on Holy Thursday or anytime the priest prepares the reserved sacrament for the sick that will be kept on the Holy Table, the priest is warned in the strongest of terms to be careful lest it be burned (one method for removing the moisture in the Lamb is to warm it on some sort of hot plate) or become moldy.

These examples alone should suffice to purge our thinking of superstitious or magical notions about the Holy Mysteries. From the very beginning the Church has emphasized the very physical nature of the Mysteries. Think just for a moment of Saint Symeon Metaphrastes' prayer before Communion which we read in our prayers of preparation in which he asks the Lord by Holy Communion to "enter into my members, my veins, my heart." In fact, read any of those prayers before Communion (as we should always do before receiving) and you will notice the utter physicality of them. We are praying for this bread which is now the Body of Christ to enter our mouth, our throat, our belly - to be, that is, digested as food always is - and through the digestive process to strengthen us and save us.

This is, in fact, the great marvel of Holy Communion, that the risen Son of God seated at the right hand of the Father in Heaven deigns to become food! As we sing on Holy Saturday, He comes "to give himself as food to the faithful." Brothers and sisters, superstitious thinking

leading to condemnation and charges of heresy needs to stop. Taken to extremes, as is happening with some, it leads to dangerous false teachings.

Are we not aware that many for whom we pray for healing and anoint with the Holy Unction die soon thereafter? Does this mean we did not pray with enough faith? Does it mean that their faith was weak? Does it mean - God forbid! – that the mystery was somehow ineffective? Of course not. But this is where this sort of thinking leads.

All of the saints died. Even the Mother of God, who we believe was without personal sin, fell asleep in the Lord and, in imitation of her Son, commended her soul to God. Lazarus, who was raised from the Lord after four days, died again.

Finally, a word about the Communion spoon. Many people, particularly online, are now in a huff about practices concerning cleaning or even replacing the spoon. The use of a spoon for Holy Communion is approximately 1000 years old. That means, prior to that, there was no Communion spoon. I will not take time to go into the more ancient practices for receiving Holy Communion, I will only say that to make a dogma out of the spoon is wrong. One critic online insisted on the use of only one spoon (as opposed to multiple spoons) because there is only one Eucharist, one Christ, etc. But is she not aware that almost all of us have communed in a Liturgy at which there were multiple chalices (and, therefore, multiple spoons)? When I visited Moscow last year there were multiple chalices on the Holy Table even at the consecration of the Gifts. When there are hundreds of communicants practical necessity requires the use of several chalices and spoons, along with several priests to administer Communion.

Brothers and sisters, there is real danger of another sort of Old Believer schism affecting the Church today as it did in Russia a few hundred years ago when people refused to accept changes to the service books and some of the practices of the faithful even when it became clear that the old ways were mistaken. At that time the corrections were often introduced heavy-handedly, but that is not the case in our situation, where the bishops have considerately and in the face of a serious health crisis introduced temporary changes, changes which in no way affect the dogmas or teachings of our Faith.

If you read just a little bit about what happened to the Old Believers after the schism you will find a history marked by fear, condemnation, unorthodox apocalyptic speculations, and in extreme cases mass suicide. Schism is always a grave sin and false teachings are always destructive. St John Chrysostom warns us in Homily 11 on Ephesians that to create a schism is as bad as heresy.

Finally, and in closing, I implore you: stay away from so-called Orthodox blogs, videos and social media posts that trade in conspiracies, fear, hatred and anger, ultimately leading to schism and the loss of faith. In so many instances people who have been Orthodox a matter of months or a few years set themselves up as experts in canon law, church history and theology and seek to teach and lead others. “Armchair bishops” without the grace of the episcopacy are leading people to their spiritual ruin.

I do not ask you to have faith in me, but I do ask you to have faith in the Church which Christ established and has kept these 2000 years through epidemics, schisms, and heresies.

With love in Christ,

A Priest of the Orthodox Church  
OCA, Diocese of the South