

Covid and the Orthodox Church: impact and responses

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My presentation takes as a guidelines three aspects proposed for us as its participants, by the organisers :

- impact of Covid for the church
- personal impact of covid
- ecumenical aspect of the analysis

Recent pandemic cough most of us by a surprise. The situation in the whole world escalated, and we found ourselves in a rather new and unfamiliar world of lockdown, social distancing, pandemic, Covid and so on and so forth.

It is still very difficult to distance oneself enough to have a clear and analytical view on the new reality that surrounds us, but one can try and reflect on where we stand for now, what is the impact of Covid situation on us personally and on the churches and church organisations that we are part of.

I am a member of the Orthodox Church, and organisation that has grounded itself in the sentries of various traditions and rituals, an organisation that withstood sentries of being the subject of persecution, being in power, undergoing destruction, and revival, being a subject of praise and criticism.

What is the impact of current pandemic on the Orthodox Church? What new challenges does this pandemic bring to the church? Is it different from the challenges of the past? If so than how?

My contribution to the discussion will aim to think through some of the questions above.

The impact of the current pandemic penetrate almost every aspect of our existence. It affected the way we live, leisure, travel, work. Many of our familiarities are changed, may be for a long time. Many of us learned the life in the lockdown, in isolation. In these extreme circumstances one needs to hold on to something familiar that remains constant, but unfortunately this is the luxury we lack as well. Everything seems to change around us, the ways we were familiar and comfortable with are no longer available to us.

Our Sunday liturgies are only by bookings, and under the recommendation of no more than once every two weeks. We have to wear masks, and hold our breath about communion from one chalice. We are fed communion like children with a spoon. If we are lucky the spoon will be sterilised after each communicant. Our fate is in the hands of the clergy who are used to make executive decisions in the church, and not all of them are used to seek advice from their parishioners.

We, as parishioners, are used to be lead by our clergy. Such a dynamic of clergy-laity relationship does not give a lot of space for laity to exercise their mind about the ecclesiastical matters, and it also isolates the clergy from its people. I think during this time of pandemic the divide could have been made acutely obvious.

The extreme examples of this could be seen in some clergy behaving irresponsibly about the lockdown and paying a heavy price for that. I am talking about some Orthodox monasteries being severely afflicted by the Covid with high numbers of contaminated and also high fatalities among the clergy.

During the time when the churches were locked down by the law of the states, the parishioners and some clergy found themselves without the possibility to serve the liturgy or to communicate. When I use the word serve with regards to the liturgy or any other services I emphasise that this is not only in relation to the clergy, the people also serve, they are the ones who validate the prayers by their 'Amen's. Unfortunately, not many people appreciate this privilege of being able to serve, as a lay people, every non sacramental service on their own, and in the presence of clergy for sacramental services.

If one to emphasise the possibility of improvement and further growth in the Orthodox Church today, one could highlight the possibility of the laity to grow properly into their own, into their highly

amendable status of Royal Priesthood. The Priesthood that serves during each service, and not just listens without even understanding or even the possibility to listen to the words that are pronounced in the alien ancient language and so on.

When people grow into their ecclesiastical roles they would understand that may be watching services on video, especially the sacramental services, although better than nothing, might still be insufficient as far as fully experiencing and living their life as full members of the Orthodox Church is concerned.

This brings another important aspect in the dynamics between the members of the church and the Orthodox services. During the time of shock to the system, may be people start appreciating the essentials of their faith, the absolute necessities of it, the core foundations of their Christianity, and the things that one can do without during the time of pandemic. During the time when we are deprived of absolutely everything it is important to realise for each one of us what we cannot be deprived of even now, even when the whole world turned upside down and stands on its head, in the most uncomfortable position. No one can deprive us of Christ, no one can deprive us of our relationship with our Lord and Saviour. The only condition for this is that we have Christ with us in the first place.

This brings me to the last point of my presentation. Having Christ in our hearts is the matter of utter most importance for us as Orthodox Christians. We can be stripped of absolutely everything else, including our ability to attend the churches and participate in the services, but no one else can take Christ away from us. This is our own choice and our prerogative. It is up to us to accept Christ or to cast Him away. And once we understand it we can slowly built our relationship with other people, with the church and its members, its hierarchy, and so on and so forth. Whether it is during the scary and unprecedented times of pandemic, or outside of it, our starting point and our finishing point is the same, it is Christ from the beginning, Christ at the end, Christ at the left, and Christ at the right, Christ in the eyes and in the heart of the people in the Church and Christ outside its boundaries. Once we focus on that, and during these troublesome times we are often forced to cling to Him, to re-find Him, and to cling to Him again and again. In this way we can find something to be thankful for even in the middle of pandemic, even when there is nothing familiar is around us.

In conclusion I shall not offer answers, but rather pause further questions, which I believe to be important to ponder during this testing times:

What is the Impact of current pandemic on my church, on my organisation and on me personally? Is it different from the global impact of COVID?

For those who wish to follow on with **Theological reflections** on the matter I propose the following questions:

How difficult is it for the Church with deeply grounded and historically formed traditions to offer a quick response to the current situation? How does this pandemic challenge our scale of ecclesiastical priorities? What are our absolute essentials and what can be changed or done without in the current difficult situation? Are certain changes in the Church necessary? Is Covid going to help and introduce these changes?

Based on the initial **responses** in the church one can say that certain level of reasonable collaboration is required even from the church establishment when the world is radically changing due to pandemic. The irresponsible and often foolishly radical examples of disobedience to the state recommendations or ungrounded call for martyrdom proved to be foolish, dangerous and ungrounded. The consequence of such a severe mistake lead to the unnecessary deaths of many.

During the total closure of the churches its spaces was often projected to the web gatherings and services. The question to pause here whether it was enough or sufficient? Does it work to serve Liturgy/sacramental services online???

Is there anything else the church could do? Charity, help to the vulnerable?