

Illness and Holy Things

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During Covid two schools of thought arose. The first was that one can receive communicable diseases from Holy Communion, because the sharing of a common spoon is a point of contact from which disease can spread. The reactionary view was that one can never get sick from Communion, because it is the Body of Christ and Life itself, and as such one cannot get sick from partaking life. Both of these positions are wrong.

Before explaining why, we should look to the Scriptures to inform us of how to handle these "competing" views. The first place to look is where I mentioned- 1 Corinthians, where St Paul addresses this issue directly. In 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, St Paul addresses the ways in which the church of Thessaloniki was abusing the Eucharistic Synaxis. They were serving in the evening, and many were having meals beforehand, at times even showing up drunk before partaking of Holy Communion. Ultimately they were not properly prepared to commune, nor were they approaching with reverence and fear of God, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep (i.e. die)" (1 Cor. 11:30). We indeed can get sick from Communion, but why? Is it because communicable illnesses can spread from the spoon like common food? Not at all! People were getting sick and dying because they were unprepared to commune.

St John Chrysostom says the following regarding 1 Corinthians 11-

What do you say, tell me? Is this Table which is the cause of so many blessings and teeming with life, become judgment? Not from its own nature, says he, but from the will of him that approaches. For as His presence, which conveyed to us those great and unutterable blessings, condemned the more them that received it not: so also the Mysteries become provisions of greater punishment to such as partake unworthily.

But why does he eat judgment to himself? Not discerning the Lord's body: i.e., not searching, not bearing in mind, as he ought, the greatness of the things set before him; not estimating the weight of the gift. For if you should come to know accurately Who it is that lies before you, and Who He is that gives Himself, and to whom, you will need no other argument, but this is enough for you to use all vigilance; unless you should be altogether fallen.

This is not the only passage that deals with this issue. In Leviticus 10, the sons of Aaron were struck down for offering strange fire (i.e. imitating pagan worship) to God. In 2 Samuel 6, Uzzah presumed he could touch the ark, which was forbidden, and for his presumption he was struck down. What comes from these passages when looked at together is our disposition matters when approaching Holy things, and these things can be for us harmful if we approach them improperly.

Why then are the two "competing" views that arose during covid wrong? The first, that communicable diseases can spread from the spoon like any other food, denigrates communion

and subjects it to corruption. The second, that Communion can never get us sick and is always good, denies that our disposition is a factor in approaching Holy things. Ultimately these are not competing views, as they both rob us of our participation in the life of God and deny the synergistic reality of the life in Christ. We are partakers of the Divine Nature (1 Peter 1:4), something that happens via participation and relationship with God. God saves us, but we must participate in this salvation via the life of the Church.

Ultimately the viewpoints that arose in covid produce the exact same outcome- a lack of reverence for Holy Things. The former leads us to denigrate Holy Communion and treat it as ordinary food, something we need not prepare for spiritually. The latter instills in us a magical view of Holy Communion, where it is good for us no matter what we do because our will is not a part of the equation. This also leads ultimately to a view, knowingly or unknowingly, that our preparation is not important when approaching the chalice. In reality, since these views lead to the same place, can we really say that they are different?

It is often the case when theological controversies are discussed today that they're done hastily. This is mostly due to the way communication technology has shaped our thinking. We need to be careful to avoid false dichotomies, lest we fall into error through opposing error. The best way to protect ourselves from this is through living the life of the Church, allowing our life in the Church to shape our thinking, not the debates that happen outside of the Church.