

The Year of the Spoon

by Father John Cox

Orthodoxy is no stranger to theological disagreement. Our most fundamental doctrinal affirmations emerge from the forge of heated debates about the person and nature(s) of Christ and the hypostasis (or lack thereof) of the Holy Spirit. Among the many larger than life figures that belong to the story of these events Ss. Athanasius and Maximus the Confessor loom particularly large, not only for the theological acumen of their contributions, but also because of the pathos of their lonely struggle for Orthodoxy in the face of overwhelming opposition. But for every critical doctrinal dispute, every epoch-making Church council, and every outsized Church father, there are dozens of minor disputes, local or regional councils, and less famous theologians filling out the body of Church history. Not to mention false teachers, misbegotten movements, and councils we label with the epithet “robber.”

When new disputes arise it is usually not obvious where they fall on this spectrum of importance and, therefore, whether those invested in them are writing the history of the Church or writing themselves out of it. However, locating our concerns along this gamut is an essential ascetic task because it contextualizes the value of the principle(s) we intend to defend and the price we ought to be willing to pay in doing so. Failure to count this cost virtually assures that the debate will be prosecuted according to the demands of the ego which invests every disagreement with an existential preciousness beyond the reach of reason.

Future historians of Orthodoxy in North America may look upon 2020 as the year of the spoon. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic parishes, bishops, and synods all over the world adjusted the manner of receiving communion. While many different approaches were taken, most of which were quickly abandoned, the approach that has garnered the most attention is the use of multiple communion spoons. An outside observer might be astonished to

discover that, despite the apparently prosaic subject matter, the question of communion spoons has generated an enormous amount of conflict within the Church and given birth to two heretofore unknown theological opinions. Though it may be just as accurate to say that the new theological opinions are themselves a major source of the conflict.

Among those who adopted multiple communion spoons, most bishops and synods advanced purely prudential arguments in defense of their use, emphasizing that the change was temporary and motivated by pastoral concern for the fearful, or to avoid scrutiny and interference from the civil authorities. Attempts to elicit from this pragmatic posture a definitive opinion that the spoon, or even the eucharist, was a vector for disease yielded either robust denial or simple silence from the bishops -- with one notable exception. In a virtual town hall with the Greek Orthodox Faithful on April 11th Archbishop Elpidophoros of the Greek Archdiocese of America asserted, unequivocally, that the communion spoon is a possible means contagion. In response to a question about whether holy communion can transmit disease the Archbishop stated that it could not. However, he went on to clarify, the spoon upon which it is carried certainly can: "If I put a metallic spoon in my mouth, this spoon can transmit the virus or any disease to me." This opinion is something new in Orthodoxy and introduces into the mundane question of how communion is distributed an alarming moral problem. If the spoon is certainly a vehicle for disease how does its continued use constitute anything less than malicious neglect on the part of the Church? The question alone demands change, not just temporarily, but permanently.

The second novel opinion brought into the church as a consequence of the novel virus is, not surprisingly, a reaction against the entire phenomenon of multiple spoons. Fr. Peter Heers (whose current ecclesiastical affiliation is not clear) produced a series of petitions, letters, interviews, and internet comments inveighing against their use and declaring that not only the spoon, but the entire church building, is a zone of sanctity in which it is impossible for anyone to be harmed or become ill. In one such comment, posted recently, Fr. Peter declares:

In the Orthodox Church, which is the Body of Christ, the Temple of God, the consecrated, "baptized," Temple where the Holy Spirit descends as on Pentecost and fills all with Light and transforms men into God-men by Grace, where not only the bread and wine but the faithful themselves are changed into the Body of Christ, where NOT ONLY the Holy Communion is

sanctified, so as to make it and all that touches it (i.e. the holy laveda (spoon)) impossible to be a communicant and carrier of sin, death and disease (which are the result of the Fall AWAY from Life), since He is Life, a Fire which burns away all impurity, but INDEED ALL THAT WHICH IS HOLY and SET APART by God because God dwells therein - such as the Holy Icons, the Holy Relics, the Holy Antidoron (blessed bread), and even the hand of the priest, who is the type and in the place of Christ and whose hands touch the Immaculate Body, or even the Holy Embrace shared by the priest and faithful (when we say “Christ is in our midst; He is and ever shall be!”) - all these are SANCTIFIED and thus FREE of corruption, which is a fruit of the fallen world.

From this we learn that the temple and its contents do not participate in corruption and that everything touched by the holy eucharist is purified and cannot carry sin, death, or disease. Such a position presents us with serious difficulties. Archbishop John Maximovitch was rendered gravely ill by a priest who poisoned the chalice that the saintly bishop consumed after Liturgy; St. Athanasius of Athos was killed by falling masonry, *in* the holy altar, when the cupola above him collapsed. Examples such as these could be multiplied, none of which should be possible according to Fr. Heers. But the historical problems presented to us pale in comparison to the pastoral and theological ones. If nothing the eucharist touches can be a carrier of disease it should be the case that all who receive worthily are healed of disease and disability, and yet the lives of many of the faithful, not to mention many of our saints, are characterized by continual physical affliction. How can we make sense of this without resorting to tortured rationalizations or fideism?

Intriguingly, the perspectives of Archbishop Elpidophoros and Fr. Heers share important underlying characteristics despite their opposing conclusions on the sanctity of the eucharistic spoon. Both make novel claims unfamiliar to the tradition of the Church. Both establish a totalizing position that, if taken seriously, leaves no room for dissent - If the Archbishop is correct, communion from a common spoon is reckless and ought to be discontinued immediately. If Fr. Heers has the truth of it, communion from multiple spoons is a kind of blasphemy. Most importantly, by advancing these new and definitive perspectives they force the debate from the domain of prudential judgments and concerns, in which it is possible to adjust to circumstances and learn from the experience, into the realm of theology, where the gravity of error, and the likelihood of such, is much greater.

It need not have been this way, though if history is any use as a teacher we should probably have anticipated that it would be. The history of the Orthodox Church is replete with passionate theological debates whose consequences have been durable and tragic -- the Old Believer and calendar schisms to name a pair.

Which brings us back to our starting place. Where is the distribution of communion on our spectrum of theological importance? Clearly, it can be made into a matter of prodigious value. But must it to be? Does the temporary use of more than one spoon demand a definitive theological rationale, or a permanent change in distribution, or a reassessment of our understanding of the relationship of creator and created, all in the space of a few months? Answer this question with a thought experiment. If you could go back to the time of Patriarch Nikon - before thousands of Old Ritualists had been executed by the State or immolated themselves on village wide pyres - would you choose a side and sally forth to win the day or would you try to slow things down and encourage everyone to practice a little patience and humility?

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