



Church of the **G**enuine **O**rthodox **C**hristians of **G**reece
The **H**oly **S**ynod

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Athens, February 29/March 13, 2020

Encyclical

Concerning the Divine Liturgy and Divine Communion at a Time When the Coronavirus is Spreading

Beloved Fathers and Brethren in Christ;

Beloved Children in the Lord:

The Orthodox Church of Christ, which constitutes His Body, is nourished and vivified by our Lord and Savior, the Giver of Life and Resurrection. She exists in the world in order to manifest the presence of God, to incorporate members within Herself—as the Ark of Salvation—with eternity as their destination, and to impart to the faithful the sanctification of Grace, “unto the healing of both soul and body.” This comes about through Divine worship, the Holy Mysteries, the holy virtues, and the ethos of the Gospel.

Divine Communion, the living, real, and spiritual Body and Blood of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is the food of incorruption and immortality and the antidote to death. It renders us blood relations with God and with the rest of mankind who are also communicants of the same Eucharistic Chalice. The Eucharist is offered, as is well known, only to the actual members of the Church, “unto remission of sins and unto life eternal.”

The celebration of the Mystery at the Divine Liturgy by clergy with an Orthodox Confession of Faith and canonical Ordination is a common and unitive act of love, which is performed by Christ Himself, the Great High Priest, Who borrows the members of His Minister. The transformation of the Bread and Wine into the Body and Blood of Christ constitutes a Miracle of miracles, offered bountifully and freely, “with fear of God, with faith and love,” to the members of the Church who fulfill the appropriate preconditions (repentance for the sake of

a clear conscience, fasting and abstinence, prayer, and forgiveness), since the Church offers the whole Christ, with all the infinite wealth of His love and power and His deifying, uncreated Energies. In this way is Theanthropic Communion accomplished, as a foretaste of eternity. Christ lives in us and we in Him, and we are mutually members of one another.

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During difficult periods in history, during wars, epidemics, and calamities, the Church has never suspended Her work and the celebration of Her Mysteries, and especially of the Divine Eucharist, because the Church is the Eucharistic Bread and Wine, the Holy Gifts, which, rather than being analogous to, resembling, or symbolizing the Body and Blood of Christ, are identical with Them, for salvation and redemption from sin, corruption, fragmentation, dissolution, demonism, and death.

If the Church, on account of natural threats, hazards, and disasters, ever ceased celebrating the Divine Liturgy with the Eucharist, partially or entirely, for a lesser or greater span of time, then it would be as though She had abolished Herself, without thenceforth any essential reason for Her existence.

However, our Lord Jesus Christ is not bound by the restrictions of the created world; neither is incorruption bound by corruption, nor life by death!

Even in a time of persecution, the Church, taking refuge in the wilderness, catacombs, dens, and caves, does not cease the saving work of Her Liturgy.

During periods of epidemic or pandemic, as is happening now with the dangerous or even deadly coronavirus, the Church continues Her worship and prayer, in order to preserve hope unextinguished, to strengthen Her members, and to impart Truth and Love, Life and Resurrection.

Consequently, Her Holy Mysteries, which are of liberating, salvific, and eternal significance, constitute the greatest and inexpressible benefit for the whole of humanity, though imparted freely, of course, solely to Her faithful members, and not to unbelievers, to those cut off from Her, nominal Christians outside Her, who are governed by the logic of this world.

Divine Communion contains the Suffering, Risen, and Ascended Christ, Who is seated at the right hand of the Father and bestows the

Holy Spirit. The Cup of the Eucharist is Light and Fire, cleansing, sanctification, and deification, the medicine of immortality. Not only does it not transmit deadly microbes, but first and foremost it washes the soul of the deadly microbes of sin and conveys also to the body lightness, health, and comeliness.

All of this is not theory, but is assured by the experience of the Body of the Church from Apostolic times, as it has been and is expressed by the ancient and modern Saints of the Orthodox Church.

Therefore, there is no danger for the faithful members of our Church in coming to Divine Communion with faith, fear of God, and love, so as to receive forgiveness and sanctification and to abide in union with Divine Grace.

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Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Stating all of the foregoing does not mean that we are unaware of the critical nature of the situation and the looming peril, on account of our sins, from the further spread of the coronavirus. Hence, we cannot ignore the good and anguished efforts of all those responsible agencies that are striving to avert this evil and to safeguard public health.

For this reason, we emphasize that in the celebration and impartation of the Divine Eucharist by clergy for the sake of the members of the Church it is necessary that all of the requisite vessels be of prime quality, clean, and resplendent with Grace and benediction. Sacred vestments and in general all of the necessary items used in worship should be well maintained and spotless. The clergy themselves should be clean and should conduct themselves with decorum and Priestly dignity. Churches should shine with cleanliness and all the rules of scrupulous hygiene should be kept therein, so as to create the sense that they are a small part of Heaven on earth. Thus, all who enter them should exclaim: “Standing in the temple of Thy glory, we think we are standing in Heaven.”

During the present difficult situation, fear and panic have no place among our faithful, clergy and laity alike. What is needed is strengthening of faith, repentance, sobriety, responsibility, and prayer.

Faithful who belong to at-risk groups, and especially those of advanced age and those with serious illnesses should avoid exposing themselves to the virus even by their physical presence in Church. It is indispensable that we avoid jostling, close contact, and in general

excessive proximity of the faithful among themselves even in places of worship. Likewise, it is better for all who present symptoms even of a mild form of virus or flu to stay at home and fulfill their Church attendance through their private prayers. If there is a special reason, their parish Priest may be notified, so that he can provide whatever spiritual care may be necessary, as has always happened and does happen in such cases, in line with the standing policy of the Orthodox Church.

All faithful who come to Churches should be attentive to their movements and conduct and should avoid intense expressions of piety that may well be bothersome for others. The faithful should also avoid close encounters, effusive behavior, embraces and hugging, keeping a safe distance.

In particular, all who disturb and upset quietness and prayer by strong symptoms of coughing, etc., should avoid so doing, should take measures to protect themselves and others, and should in such cases be content rather with private prayer at home.

If, as true Christians, we have love and concern for others, let us display it by refraining from behaving heedlessly, tiresomely, or even dangerously towards them.

Likewise, it is already well known that the basic rules of personal hygiene are extremely necessary for our own good and that of others: punctilious hand-washing, cleanliness of living spaces, and the avoidance of touching our faces with our hands.

After the Divine Liturgy or any other Divine service there is no need for lingering in the Church or outside it. It is better to avoid gatherings, conversations, etc., in order to curtail the likelihood of communicating disease.

We mention all of these points because while Divine Communion is indeed intrinsically insusceptible to defilement, nonetheless the environment even of the Church and of its surrounding areas and rules of conduct for personal interactions among the faithful (accompanied by heedful or heedless behavior) do not ensure safety and hygiene of soul or body in a mechanical and compulsory fashion. Any inattentiveness, deviation, or excess always has unpleasant repercussions. When the human factor of imperfection or indifference intrudes, there the Grace of God does not automatically act to restrain or alleviate it. It abides and acts only where the conditions are suitable, where people diligently do what is expected of them, and especially where their hearts are pure.

It is also imperative for us to make it clear that the Church of Christ is not influenced by the modus operandi and practices of extra-ecclesiastical schismatic circles or heretical groups, neither does She define Her course or Her decisions according to circumstances thereby. These are not examples of how She should think and act. Likewise, when it comes to regulating Her household affairs, She does not await the suggestions of people outside Her, even of “experts,” who, if not under the sway of a hostile and anti-Christian spirit, are at best unqualified to offer proposals for Her functioning, for the celebration of Her worship, for the exercise of oikonomia and how it is to be applied in the impartation of the Sacred Mysteries to Her faithful. This constitutes unprecedented interference in Her internal independence, and it is not possible for one who has no experience of Her life, on the pretext of safeguarding the health of the citizenry, to make pronouncements concerning all that governs Her and Her activity! The Church—She alone, and no one else—is responsible for determining the rules for Her worship and good order. In addition, She preserves with reverence the time-honored practices that have always prevailed in Her because of their effectiveness, benevolence, and sacredness.

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Beloved Fathers and Brethren:

In this period of fasting, repentance, inner recollection, and prayer that we are traversing, God’s love for mankind, which arranges all things for the profit of our souls, has permitted a great tribulation in the world, for reasons of its Divine All-Knowing Wisdom. The unstable, and indeed arrogant course of the world cannot continue unrestrained and unimpeded. Apostasy at the level of faith and morals cannot keep galloping ahead with ever-increasing ugliness without God hindering it and bringing us to our senses.

The responsibility of us who, by God’s mercy, constitute His small flock is great, both in the preservation at all costs of what has been handed down to us and in the reminder to those around us of the Truth that has been entrusted to us. Our better repentance and prayer, not only for ourselves but also for those who do not repent or pray, will demonstrate our love and elicit the mercy of God. At the same time, our readiness, sobriety, and alertness, our social responsibility and our self-sacrificial attitude towards serving those in need will provide a strong witness to the Truth of our Faith.

May we show ourselves worthy of our mission to this world of corruption and confusion, so that we may be vouchsafed Divine Beatitude as wise servants, as children of light, who have proved ourselves faithful in few things, that we may be granted the enjoyment of the eternal good things prepared for those who love the Lord!

The Holy Synod