

Eastern Orthodoxy and the challenge of COVID-19

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Your Eminence Metropolitan of Demetrias

Your Excellence the President of the Center for Interreligious Dialogue and Culture of
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Your Excellence the Cultural Counselor of the Cultural Center of the Embassy of the
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Dear Professors,

Dear all

The current situation

During the last months, humanity is experiencing an unprecedented situation. The gradual spread of the new coronavirus (COVID-19) caused global panic and despair, while it has so far led to hundreds of thousands of deaths. Not just public health, but also politics, economics, trade and above all interpersonal relations have been confronted with a crisis, which calls into question and tests every certainty and security, individual, national, religious or other. COVID-19, this new scourge that devours the flesh of humanity, threatens the human species itself, compelling the national governments to take strict measures that otherwise could never be imagined by any of us who live especially in the context of the western liberal democracies. Movement restrictions, partial closure or closure of schools and businesses, quarantine in specific geographic areas and international travel restrictions, forced social distancing were just a few of the public health and social measures taken by governments worldwide to prevent or limit, sometimes with greater success (as in Greece), and sometimes not (as in major European countries and US), the lethal spread of the virus, especially in vulnerable groups of the population, that is our grandparents, vulnerable groups but quite often also younger people and children. It was a crisis, which showed in practice that globalization is not just a theoretical or ideological construction, which came up in the mind of a directorate, who supposedly control the destiny of humanity, but the very reality we live in, our own global village, where everything that happens in the other side of the planet will quickly knock on our door. In contrast to any kind of nationalism and wall-building, the coronavirus pandemic showed that borders are nothing but human constructions that ultimately cannot protect us from a real enemy, one that threatens human life itself. And religions, the Christian Churches in general and the

Orthodox Church in particular, what role did they play or can they play in the midst of this tragic situation?

Being an important factor of crisis management, Covid-19 harshly affected the spiritual life of Christians from all over the world, and especially the Orthodox faithful in traditional Orthodox Christian countries. It appeared, however, that once again many Orthodox Churches were unprepared to face timely and effectively an enemy who does not threaten some few or part of the population of the planet, but it is threat to every single human living being on earth. Orthodoxy, having embarked for many centuries in the chariot of a meta-historical view of reality was unable, as the current situation has shown, to deal with sobriety and, above all, with appeal to its rich tradition proposing solutions that will theologically and pastorally offer to the people, not only to its flock, a message of hope and trust to the Lord of History, who himself overcame death and offers us generously eternal life. Sometimes avoiding to express immediately a formal position, or to undertake a clear initiative, the Orthodox Churches (mainly their institutional expression) in most cases were obliged to implement the measures taken by the national governments, an attitude which has led to the view that the Church is submissive, without resistance to the emperor, to state power, unable to resist against, as was characteristically said, “a new persecution of Christians or Christianity,” or an “anti-Christian conspiracy” from the West (as in the case of the Church in Moldavia, for example, but also in all the countries especially in connection with 5G communication networks, or the vaccine related to Bill Gates’s microchip etc.), which was intended to hurt the authentic faith. The closure of the churches, the ban of the Liturgy and the services, especially in the difficult times of the Great Lent and Easter, and par excellence the Communion practice (focusing on the means – common or multiple spoons etc- and not on the essence of the matter) were considered a *casus belli* for those from the faithful (?), hierarchs, clergy and in principal laity, who they chose a military stance, slashing against an invisible enemy which plots against Orthodoxy, by attempting to corrupt or alter the traditional faith of the people. The frequent ambiguity of the institutional Church in all these cases (despite the fact that there were also hierarchs and theologians, who resisted this kind of ecclesiastical populism, attempting reasonably to provide a compassionate interpretation of the present situation, by offering consolation to the needy and frightened people) nurtured and often strengthened, more or less, such phenomena of fundamentalism that treat any historically and theologically well-grounded opinion, expressed by reputable and eminent voices (scientists, theologians etc.), as propaganda against the traditional faith, cutting off any possibility for a severe dialogue.

So what should be done in this respect? How Eastern Orthodoxy could address the present situation?

Let me now turn to specific ways, by which Orthodoxy could contribute to the ongoing discussion around coronavirus:

I will limit myself only to the following two points, through which I would like to highlight the important role religion can play in the midst of this pandemic contributing to the unity of the people and the relief of their pain:

a) *Individual responsibility* along with social distancing has become one of the most popular instructions on the side of politicians and scientists as the most effective weapon in the fight against COVID-19. At the same time, however, it was understood as a challenge if not a threat especially for the Orthodox Christians who boldly claim to experience the social and communal aspect of Christian life. That said, it appears to be quite difficult for the Orthodox to change their mentality and adopt an attitude that opposes, as they believe, the very heart of their communal existence. But is it so? Albeit true that the Orthodox often oppose to western individualism, in favor of a communal and personalistic perception of human identity, as the core aspect of their tradition, one should be ready to admit that this individual-personhood debate is more a naïve exaggeration if not an ideological construction, rather than a fact. Without going into detail, one cannot become a person that is an identity that derives from relationship, unless one is once and for all an individual that is an entity which inclines towards the other. This relates to the fact that individual responsibility requires a long and gradual process of deep individualization that is of taking seriously into account of the *hypostatic* aspect of human identity against the predominant role given to *ecstasis* which focuses on relationship. It goes without saying that relationship and otherness constitute two crucial aspects of human identity as they are interpreted by the Greek patristic tradition. In the midst of the current war, a certain balance is required so as the human being to reach its fullness without being lost in the valley of an often impersonal communal life. During this pandemic, individual responsibility arises then as one of the most important factors that can guarantee public health. If the goal of Christian life is *theosis*, that is the (personal and at the same time communal) salvation of the entire cosmos, a necessary step should be taken from the Orthodox towards the conservation of human health against threats like the coronavirus but also and perhaps more important against conspiracy theories and mentalities that put at risk the very being of humanity. In this light, individual responsibility is closely related to the ontology of humanity, since it means to take seriously into consideration both the individual entity and the interconnection between human beings along with a strong conviction that human life and materiality matters already here in history and not only in the afterlife.

b) *Ascetic ethos-repentance*. In this vein, COVID-19, call us to move forward a new lifestyle. If we all agree that more or less the abuse of the planet and the continuous consumption of its resources is one of the main reasons of the appearance of various diseases and pandemics, the time has come to adopt a way of life that takes seriously the needs of all the creatures that live in this world, not in a managerial or functional way, but primarily in an ascetical or liturgical one, where the health of the creation depends upon our call to work as “priests of creation” that offer the entire cosmos to the hands of God. This idea, followed by a certain ascetical ethos which helps to reduce energy consumption, to reverse the planet pollution, to worry about the environmental crisis and the catastrophic urgent problems that have arisen in people's daily lives

(global warming, heavy precipitation events, floods, increasing risk of forests fires, biodiversity loss, and sea pollution from plastics, etc. in other words to adopt a new lifestyle means not just to follow certain orders or moral values, but primarily to pave a new path, a new way of life based on an ontological and not just ethical interconnection between humanity and the rest planet.

By way of conclusion

The coronavirus pandemic with the challenges it posed in all levels brought to the fore the theological and pastoral poverty of certain Orthodox Churches, but above all highlighted the need for *hermeneutical* criteria, upon which theology, as the prophetic voice of the Church, will be able to evaluate and interpret the situation at hand, projecting, through the richness of its apostolic and patristic tradition, certain solutions that can indeed to be a lifeline not only for the existential treatment of COVID-19 but also a legacy to deal with similar crises in the future. The Church drawing its being from the end of time, from the eschaton, it is called in the midst of this crisis to form an *ethos*, a model of life that above all will respect the Creator himself, who has offered the gift of life generously. During the Eucharist, which constitutes the Church itself, the faithful are called to offer to God and the Father, through Son in the Holy Spirit, the gifts of creation, in order to transform them into an antidote to eternal life, thus offering a foretaste here and now of the coming kingdom. This does not mean that death and evil, the infection by various viruses, have ceased or will cease until the final crisis to affect us or determine our lives. Lazarus was resurrected by the Lord according to the Gospel account, nevertheless he died again. Corruption and death permeates the whole creation, and although they may be suspended under certain conditions, by no means they can be overlooked or underestimated, especially when it comes to integrity and health of every human being. Ultimately, what God really expects from us, especially in this state of emergency, it is “mercy and not sacrifice.”