


Hans-Jürgen Feulner, Elias Haslwanter (Hg.)

GOTTESDIENST AUF EIGENE GEFAHR?

*Worship
at Your Own Risk?*



Die Feier der Liturgie
in der Zeit von Covid-19

 **Aschendorff**
Verlag

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Liturgy and Hygiene in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Protection Measures Initiated
by the Romanian Orthodox Church, February–June 2020

VLĂDUȚ-IULIAN ROȘU

The quarantine imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) involved all aspects of social life, including the church's overall mission and liturgy. In some countries of the world, public religious manifestations in churches or other places of worship have been banned, and in others, a number of restrictions have been imposed on issues like the number of participants, the distance they must keep from each other and other hygiene measures. These had to be followed by both worshipers and believers. Such measures were also taken in Romania, where the gatherings at the liturgy were temporarily suspended between March 23¹ and May 14, 2020². We will not engage in any political rhetoric or debatable details here, but focus on two main reasons for which this restriction was imposed. Firstly, the impossibility of maintaining a safe physical distance between people attending religious ceremonies, and secondly, the reception of the Holy Eucharist. The first reason applies to all areas of activity, whether it is work, public transportation, concerts, football matches, or other activities that bring together groups of people. The second reason is strictly related to the ecclesial space.

1 Conditions for Participation in Religious Ceremonies

In the first instance, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania, respectively on February 27, 2020, the Romanian Patriarchate issued a press release

¹ Cf. ROMANIAN GOVERNMENT, Ordonanța militară nr. 2/21.03.2020 privind măsuri de prevenire a răspândirii COVID-19. URL: bit.ly/3jtN5TC [accessed: June 24, 2020]. All following translations are mine.

² Cf. IDEM, Hotărârea nr. 24/14.05.2020 privind aprobarea instituirii stării de alertă la nivel național și a măsurilor de prevenire și control a infecțiilor, în contextul situației epidemiologice generate de virusul SARS-CoV-2. URL: bit.ly/2Hu4T3Q [accessed: June 24, 2020].

through which the representatives of churches and monasteries from all over Romania were obliged to ensure the appropriate ventilation of churches, the frequent disinfection of icons and the administration of the Holy Eucharist in conditions of total hygiene at all times. Simultaneously, the faithful were advised to avoid crowded places, including churches, as well as to comply with the measures ordered by public authorities.³ Because the number of infections with the new virus increased rapidly at the beginning of March, the Romanian Patriarchate issued a new press release updating the measures and recommendations made at end of February. It required a hand sanitation area in the vicinity of the churches with the necessary products (water, soap, disinfectants, etc.).⁴ All parishes and monasteries in Romania received the notification through local church organizations and implemented these provisions accordingly.

On March 16, 2020, the President of Romania, Klaus Werner Johannis, declared a state of emergency and on March 18, 2020, a military ordinance entered into force, which provided for the suspension of all cultural, scientific, artistic, religious and sports activities held indoors.⁵ Thus, the Romanian Orthodox Church had to send a new press release ordering that the religious services be held only outdoors, near the place of worship, with the participation of up to 100 people, keeping a distance of at least one meter between the participants.⁶ However, the situation worsened and, starting on March 23, 2020, the attendance of the faithful at the services was stopped entirely. In this context, the Romanian Patriarchate formulated a series of measures regarding hygiene based on the *Military Ordinance no. 2* promulgated by the Romanian government:

1. In all parishes, the liturgy and the other liturgical services should be officiated inside the church by the clergy (priests, deacons, cantors), but without the participation of the faithful. In the monasteries, the presence of all members of the monastic community was allowed during worship, but similarly, the participation of the faithful was forbidden.
2. Although the presence of the believers was not allowed in the liturgy or other communal liturgical services, baptisms, weddings and funerals

³ Cf. BASILICA NEWS AGENCY, Patriarhia Română: Măsuri sanitare și spirituale în timp de epidemie (February 27, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3jtN81K [accessed: June 25, 2020].

⁴ Cf. IDEM, Îndrumări către parohii și mănăstiri pentru respectarea unor măsuri de prevenire a îmbolnăvirii cu noul Coronavirus (Covid-19) (March 12, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3jo6JQV9 [accessed: June 25, 2020].

⁵ Cf. ROMANIAN GOVERNMENT, Ordonanță militară privind unele măsuri de primă urgență care privesc aglomerările de persoane și circulația transfrontalieră a unor bunuri, în Monitorul Oficial al României, partea I, nr. 219/ 18.03.2020. URL: bit.ly/2TnAeIb [accessed: June 25, 2020].

⁶ Cf. BASILICA NEWS AGENCY, Îndrumări actualizate pentru parohii și mănăstiri, în contextul noilor măsuri de prevenire a îmbolnăvirii cu noul coronavirus (March 18, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3ksngTX [accessed: June 25, 2020].

(considered private events) were accepted with a participation of a maximum of eight people, including church staff.

3. At the request of the faithful, the clergy was allowed to travel to their homes for spiritual conversations, confessions or for the administration of the Eucharist, in compliance with the protective measures, including the wearing of masks and sanitary gloves. Confession and communion to the sick in hospitals were allowed only in strict observance of the rules of each hospital. Regarding the administration of confession and the Eucharist to the sick at home, it was done according to the following procedure: the priest completes a personal travel declaration according to the model approved by the state authorities, indicating as a reason for travel, assistance to the elderly or children. Upon entering the believer's home, the priest should use sanitary shoes, mask and gloves, after previously washing his hands with soap, water and disinfectant; after doing so, the priest should use only one liturgical book (*Euchologion*), one epitrachelion and the liturgical kit necessary for the administration of the Eucharist (*eucharistic spoon, chalice*); objects that will be both previously and afterwards disinfected.
4. At the same time, the church staff was obliged to carry out the permanent disinfection of public places, the church furniture and the frequent ventilation of the churches, ensuring a sanitation area for the clergy or other employees (cantors or other ministers).⁷

These measures were applied up until May 15, 2020, when the Romanian government declared a *State of Alert* instead of a *State of Emergency*. Starting with this day, the presence of the faithful was allowed, but only outside the churches and with the obligation to keep a distance of two meters between them and wearing a protective mask. The number of servers at the altar was reduced in order to keep a distance of two meters between them, as well as the number of cantors. For instance, there was one hierarch, two priests, two deacons and two altar servers and a maximum of three cantors in parishes and six cantors in cathedrals, keeping sanitary physical distance between them. At the same time, it was required to permanently sanitize the liturgical objects used for services, to frequently clean furniture and floors and to avoid touching or kissing holy icons and relics, as well as the hand of the ministers. It was recommended that veneration for the holy icons and for the holy relics be shown by prostration, accompanied by the sign of the Holy Cross, and respect for the hierarch and priest by a gesture of bowing the head. Regarding other services, respectively baptisms, weddings or funerals, the number of participants was extended to 16, in compliance with health rules.

⁷ Cf. IDEM, Noi măsuri privind slujbele și activitățile sociale bisericești (March 22, 2020). URL: bit.ly/2TkC3pn [accessed: June 25, 2020].

For example, in the case of baptism, it was ordered that after each ceremony the baptismal font be cleaned and disinfected, and after each wedding service, the glass of wine, from which the bride and groom drank, should also be washed and sanitized.⁸

Starting mid June 2020, the Romanian government ordered the gradual lifting of social restrictions, and thus it was allowed to resume the Divine Service inside the church, of course also keeping social distance of two meters and wearing a protective mask. For the faithful who follow these services outside of the church building, the obligatory social distance was reduced to 1.5 meters. At the same time, with regard to requests for individual prayers or confessions, it was decided that they should be scheduled in advance, in order to avoid crowds and to be held outside, at times when there are no other ceremonies in the church, keeping social distance and waiting in a single line. Both the priest and the faithful who goes to confession or requests another liturgical service were obliged to wear a protective mask and maintain the sanitary physical distance.⁹

All these protective measures and liturgical recommendations were established by the Romanian Patriarchate in close collaboration with the Romanian State and based on the legislation promulgated during the state of emergency, respectively of the state of alert declared on the Romanian territory. All this had one single purpose, to protect the health of the believers. In addition to guidance, the Church constantly urged social responsibility. At the end of each press release, the Romanian Patriarchate emphasized that “life and health are gifts from God, but we have a duty to defend and cultivate them with permanent responsibility.”

2 The Issue of the Reception of the Holy Eucharist by the Faithful

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the reception of the Holy Eucharist by the faithful is administered using a *eucharistic spoon* (gr. λαβίς = tong¹⁰). In the past, the communion of the faithful was done in a manner similar to that of the clergy. The priests were used to distribute the Holy Body into the hands of each believer, and they consumed it themselves. And after that, the deacon used to support the process administering the Blood of Christ, kept in the chalice, by holding it for each believer that would approach and sip from it; this is in fact still the current

⁸ Cf. IDEM, Îndrumări bisericești pentru starea de alertă (May 14, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3jthN-MA [accessed: June 26, 2020].

⁹ Cf. IDEM, Noi îndrumări bisericești care se aplică din data de 17 iunie 2020 (June 17, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3jz7aZ2 [accessed: June 26, 2020].

¹⁰ In the Greek tradition, the name λαβίς has been established, because at a symbolic level, the *eucharistic spoon* is associated with the “tong with burning coal”, through which the prophet Isaiah was cleansed (Isaiah 6: 6–8).

practice today of the Eastern Orthodox clergy.¹¹ Elsewhere, the Holy Body was already soaked in the Holy Blood and was given to the faithful directly in the mouth and for this reason less often than in the palm of their hand. The cup is no longer offered to lay people as it's done today by Assyrian Church of the East.¹²

In the context of the Coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19), the *eucharistic spoon* was a subject of dispute in the Romanian media. Of course, its use bothered some opponents of the Romanian Orthodox Church even before this pandemic. Thanks to the mass media, that often acts uniformed and with biased rhetoric, a campaign of misinformation and fear took place, with a particular purpose to shake people's trust in their own ecclesial practice, and to test the reaction of the faithful and the church. Although there was never a case of illness attributed to the sharing of the same spoon in the history of the Orthodox Church, the Roma-

¹¹ See in this regard ConstAp VIII, 13, 9–15 (SChr 336, 206/207. 208/209. 210/211); BASIL THE GREAT, Letter 93: To the Patrician Caesaria, Concerning Communion, in: Alexander ROBERTS et al. (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, New York 2007, 179.

¹² The fact that the *eucharistic spoon* is also used in some non-Chalcedonian rites (Coptic, Ethiopian and Syro-Jacobite rites) has led some to believe that it was introduced rather early in the Church history, around the 4th century in Antioch, and St. John Chrysostom, who later came to Constantinople, brought with him this custom that later became widespread everywhere in the 5th century. But this hypothesis seems to contradict the information provided by St. John Chrysostom (690/691), which reads as follows: he, when referring to *labris* (gr. λαβίς) has in mind the priest's hands/fingers, which act as pliers when the Holy Eucharist is being shared) [JOHN CHRYSOSTOMOS, Cateheza II către candidații la Botez, apud Petru PRUTEANU, *Liturghia Ortodoxă. Istorie și Actualitate*, Bucharest 2013, 350], as well as Canon 101 of the Council in Trullo "If any one wishes to receive the immaculate Body [...], [then] let him draw near, arranging his hands in the form of a cross, and so let him receive the communion of grace. But such as, instead of their hands, make vessels of gold or other materials for the reception of the divine gift, and by these receive the immaculate communion, we by no means allow to come, as preferring inanimate and inferior matter to the image of God" [RĂZVAN PERȘA, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Bucharest 2018, 331]. This canon, even if it does not make any reference to the spoon mentioned before, attests that some of the believers attended the liturgy with their own vessels, in which they received the Holy Eucharist. There were cases when some of the laymen secretly took the Holy Body to friends or relatives that were banned from Holy Communion or, even worse, used the Holy Body for obscure purposes (e. g. sorcery). According to Robert Taft, the first clear testimony about the use of the spoon belongs to Athanasius of Sinai († 700), and is later mentioned by the Pseudo-Sophronius of Jerusalem as a general custom. It is certain that at the time of the Great Schism, Cardinal Humbert blamed the Byzantines for the introduction of the spoon, seeing it as an innovation [PL 143, cols. 951–952], and testified at that time (mid 11th century) that not all the Orthodox used it. Therefore, the custom of using the spoon became widespread somewhere after this period, most likely around the 12th century, a tradition that continues to this day in Eastern Orthodox Church. On this topic see Robert TAFT, *Byzantine Communion Spoons: A Review of the Evidence*, in: DOP 50 (1996), 209–238; IDEM, *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom*, vol. 6: *The Communion, Thanksgiving, and Concluding Rites* (OCA 281), Rome 2008, 281–306.

nian Orthodox Church was forced to formulate the first response on this issue on February 27, 2020. The Romanian Patriarchate made the following recommendations concerning the communion of the faithful:

1. People who are afraid of falling ill by sharing the Holy Chalice with the same spoon may ask the priest to share (as an exception) the Holy Communion from the Holy Ark (usually used for sick people) at any time of the day. This can be offered to them with a spoon brought from home and used exclusively for this purpose and by a single person (a crumb from the Holy Communion is placed in a spoon of wine). The spoon then remained in the custody of the church, since it is being used in the administration of the Eucharist and it represents an object of worship.
2. The Holy Eucharist had to be prepared and administered in completely hygienic conditions and the liturgical objects used in the Liturgy (holy vessels, spoon, coverings, etc.) had to be sanitized both before and after the liturgy.
3. People who cannot receive communion because they are already sick (who are in the hospital, in quarantine or in isolation) were advised to taste the Holy Water, received from the church on the feast of the Lord's Baptism, at home.¹³

Although shortly after these clarifications, the presence of the faithful at services was suspended between March 23 and May 14, 2020, during this period the attacks of the media against the *eucharistic spoon* did not stop. Thus, before the reopening of the churches on May 15, 2020, and under the pressure of the media, the Romanian Ministry of Health by *Order no. 1070/826/2020*, which entered into force on May 15, 2020, established "the Eucharist should not be offered in conditions in which disposable spoons and chalices cannot be provided."¹⁴ This settlement inevitably led to controversy and discussion for and against the church. The response of the Romanian Orthodox Church read as follows:

"The Romanian Orthodox Church, according to its centuries-old liturgical tradition, cannot accept, even in times of pandemic, the use of the single-use chalice and spoon for communion of the faithful during the Divine Liturgy. In this regard, with the approval of the majority of members of the Holy Synod, consulted in writing on May 11, 2020, on the manner of general Communion of the faithful at the Divine Liturgy, during a pandemic, will be decided after June 1, 2020, in consensus with the other Orthodox Churches."¹⁵

¹³ BASILICA NEWS AGENCY, Măsurile sanitare (s. fn. 3).

¹⁴ IDEM, Îndrumări bisericești pentru starea de alertă (May 14, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3jm41eU [accessed: June 27, 2020].

¹⁵ Ibid.

Although the communion of the faithful with the *eucharistic spoon* is not a dogma of the church, it still is a practice that has been imposed over time and a change to it cannot be made arbitrarily. Again, never in the history of the church has there been any case of illness that could be and can be attributed to the sharing of the same spoon. However, according to the tradition of the Orthodox Church, at the end of each liturgy, priests and deacons have the canonical responsibility of consuming the remaining elements of the Holy Eucharist even if sometimes, many sick people have shared in it. If necessary, the Church has the wisdom to find other ways to distribute the communion.¹⁶ These new ways, however, have to come from within the church, and not from those who do not participate in the church's life or are ignorant of the church's practices. In this case concerning the Eucharist, the intent of the government and the media is to exert pressure, while not being familiar with the church's life and practice, and being far from the Holy Eucharist and the Church.

In individual cases, when the priest is asked to distribute the Holy Eucharist to people with various diseases or infections, communion can be done in ways that take into consideration the needs of the people and doctors' recommendations: either with a *eucharistic spoon* in the usual way or by leaving the communion on a special tray, so that the patient may take it and consume it in the presence of the priest (who will respect the recommended distance). This way of distributing the Holy Eucharist has sometimes been practised in case of those suffering from the plague or leprosy.¹⁷ It can still be practised in the case of a Coronavirus patient who is isolated in a hospital, but not as a preventive measure for everyone. These exceptional cases must not be turned into rules or applied for the broad masses of the faithful. The private communion of the sick and the public communion of the faithful are two different things and should not be confused. Out of necessity,

¹⁶ During the pandemic, new methods of communion were developed in some of the Eastern Churches. For example, in the the Russian Orthodox Church through *Proceeding No. 30 of March 17, 2020*, recommended that no one be deprived of the Holy Communion, and that the communion be continued with a single spoon, that will be wiped with a napkin made from a material soaked in disinfectant and then washed in water. The napkin should also be kept under the communicants chin to prevent the Holy Communion from falling down, and the lips should be wiped with disposable paper towels (that will be burned afterwards). At the same time, it is recommended that the napkins be washed at high temperature and disinfected after the Liturgy. In the Greek Churches, communion was administered by way of "casting", without the spoon touching the lips of the faithful [RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH, Instructions to rectors of parishes and monasteries' town churches, abbots and abbesses of the monasteries of the Russian Orthodox Church over the threat of spreading coronavirus infection (March 17, 2020). URL: bit.ly/2TmjK2O [accessed: June 28, 2020]

¹⁷ This practice was recorded by St. Nicodemus the Hagiorite. See the interpretation of the 28th Canon, in: NEOPHYTE OF CONSTANTINOPLE, *Pidalion sau Cărma Bisericii Ortodoxe [Pidalion or The Rudder of the Orthodox Church]*, Iași 2007, 261.

especially when it's not possible to contact the bishop, the priest can make exceptions according to his conscience, but for general cases, the general rules must be followed.

According to the Romanian political scientist and member of the panel of experts on freedom of religion or belief at the OSCE, Cătălin Raiu, “the intrusion of the state in church life is an anti-democratic attitude and has the potential to create long-term dangerous precedents and gestures of hatred towards members of religious communities.” In a democratic political regime, the state’s policies on religious life must be generated neither by an excess of church protectionism nor by exacerbated secularism, but by the principle of religious freedom. According to international standards (UN, OSCE, EU, Office of International Religious Freedom of the US State Department, etc.), governments cannot suspend religious freedom either in a state of war or in a state of emergency.¹⁸ Therefore, the gesture of the Romanian government is nothing but abuse against the fundamental rights of the religious activities in Romania guaranteed by *Law no. 489/2006 on religious freedom*. The use of *the eucharistic spoon*, specific to the Eastern Orthodox Churches is a liturgical act whose concretization depends strictly on the individual responsibility of priests and believers, its censorship not being the responsibility of the government. The regulation of religious life cannot be made on discriminatory principles. The fact that through the recently issued recommendations, the state targets only certain liturgical practices specific to the Eastern Orthodox Churches, can have hazardous long-term effects generating tense relations between religious denominations, as well as between cults and the state. Thus, the state has a duty to facilitate citizens’ access to rights and freedoms and to create consensus, not social tensions and social divisions.¹⁹

The Romanian Orthodox Church has realistically and rationally perceived the unrest, the concern of some believers and the fear of the authorities who inevitably think in secular, not religious terms, and has found ways to protect the population. Thus, the Romanian Patriarchate communicated at the end of May that the common communion during the Divine Liturgy service should be postponed for a short period of time in order to consult with the other Orthodox Churches on finding a single way to distribute the communion to the faithful in the context of this pandemic.²⁰ At the same time, until the situation of the pandemic improves, the Romanian Orthodox Church recommended its priests

¹⁸ Cf. Cătălin PENA, Statul țintește doar practici liturgice specifice Bisericii răsăritene. Apelul expertului României la OSCE (May 12, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3knQJ2N [accessed: June 28, 2020].

¹⁹ Cf. Cătălin RAIU, Este închiderea bisericilor o agresiune la adresa libertății religioase? (March 29, 2020). URL: bit.ly/2Tmk3uu [accessed: June 28, 2020].

²⁰ Cf. BASILICA NEWS AGENCY, Vasile Bănescu aduce lămuriri privind ultimul ordin emis de autorități (May 23, 2020). URL: bit.ly/3dXA97j [accessed: June 28, 2020].

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and faithful the *individual communion* (from the one kept in the Holy Ark) as an alternative to the *common communion* in the liturgy. This can be done at any time of the day (after the end of the liturgy) at the request of the faithful and the prior consent of the priest.