

An Orthodox Sermon that ALL need to read, especially now!

“Swine Flu in the Chalice”

By: Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta (Greek Archdiocese) - September 11 2009

As we look forward to the blessings of New Ecclesiastical Year, I greet you with joy and love in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with prayers and good wishes for a healthy and joyous year. As I was traveling this summer, both in our Metropolis and Greece, I heard some talk from our brothers and sisters that we should question the way that we receive the Body and Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, due to concerns about the H1N1 virus. They were concerned that this would transmit the virus to the Faithful and of course they have a point.

If we were receiving only bread and wine there would be some, though not a lot, of cause for concern. Aside from the scientific facts showing that there is no difference in rates of illness between people who receive Holy Communion and the general population, aside from the fact that there have always been infectious and communicable disease, aside from the fact that more people die in car wrecks every year than from any flu, in order to receive we must have faith. Indeed as human beings we are weak in faith.

Even the disciples, who lived with Christ on a daily basis were weak in faith. We see this in the Gospel of St. Matthew, after the feeding of the 5000 when the disciples were caught in a violent storm on the lake, and they see Jesus walking toward them: “And Peter answered Him and said, “Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water.” So He said, “Come.” And when Peter had come down out of the boat, he walked on the water to go to Jesus. But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, “Lord, save me!” And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

When Peter trusted in Christ, he was able to walk on water, but when he became afraid, he began to sink. And again in Matthew 17, a father brings his child who is possessed by a demon to Jesus to be cured, which the disciples were unable to do: “Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?” So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

In order to receive, we must have faith, but unfortunately sometimes our brothers and sisters with little faith put up obstacles to freely approaching the chalice. Indeed when we are receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord, there is no fear, because "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love." (1 John 4:18). On the other hand, when we are afraid of anything: disease, accidents, misfortune, who do we ask for help?

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our Lord is here to bless us and help us, not to make us sick. With this kind of understanding, we can give the answer to ourselves. When we think about receiving the Body and Blood, we realize that there have been many diseases over the past 2000 years, most of them more serious and deadly than the H1N1 virus. However I believe that we should explain to the Faithful what there are receiving and why. After all, we clergy consume all the elements left after Holy Communion is offered, and according to my knowledge, I have never heard of a priest, deacon or bishop falling ill afterwards.

As a matter of fact, I had the personal experience, when I was younger and an Archdeacon in Patras, and almost every Saturday after the Divine Liturgy, we visited the nearby TB hospital to offer Holy Communion to those who were too ill to come to church. These poor people, before modern treatments and antibiotics, were extremely infectious. Yet neither I nor my spiritual father, Father Artemios or Father Christopher developed tuberculosis after consuming the Holy Gifts. Not only that, we never even got sick. This happened not merely once or twice but repeatedly over the years. Father Christopher is still living (now in his 70's) and so am I. Father Artemios died years ago of heart disease, not TB.

This is the situation, my brothers, which we must face and be honest with those who are weak in faith, so we can reassure them and help them to be strengthened in their faith. The only reason to approach the chalice in fear, is fear of God, if we receive unworthily. Truly I give glory to God that we have His Church, where we can pray for one another, pray for all people who are suffering from cancer or other diseases or misfortunes.

As we pray for them, we should also pray for those of little faith, and as St. Paul tells us in Hebrews 4:16, "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." As we begin a new Ecclesiastical Year, I give thanks and praise to Almighty God for all His abundant blessings, and to send you my prayers and best wishes for a peaceful, healthy and joyous New Year for you and your Parish family.

I remain, Paternally yours with love in Christ,

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta