



By Alexei Krindatch ([akrindatch@aol.com](mailto:akrindatch@aol.com)), Coordinator

National Census of Orthodox Christian Churches / 2020 US Religion Census

## Holy Communion during the Pandemic in American Orthodox Parishes

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Holy Communion is the pivotal point of the Orthodox Christian worship experience. This Sacrament has been traditionally served with the same spoon and from a common chalice for all faithful present at the Liturgy. The spread of COVID-19 has made many church members apprehensive about continuing to use a common spoon, and a number of parishioners have stopped receiving Holy Communion out of fear of contagion. Consequently, some American Orthodox jurisdictions, dioceses, and parishes have introduced various temporary changes in administering the Eucharist. This report examines the wide range of questions related to these changes through the eyes of Orthodox parish clergy. Each chapter can be read separately depending on the reader's particular interests. The study was initiated by the Orthodox Theological Society in America ([www.otsamerica.org](http://www.otsamerica.org)).

Data were gathered July 21-31, 2020, via an online survey of 609 parish priests representing all Orthodox jurisdictions and from all parts of the country. The following major subjects are discussed in the report:

- ❖ The impact of the pandemic on participation of parishioners in the Sacrament of Holy Communion
- ❖ New ways of administering the Holy Communion in various American Orthodox jurisdictions
- ❖ How parishes distribute Holy Communion to parishioners who cannot attend worship services
- ❖ Clergy's opinions about what is and is not acceptable with regard to different methods of offering the Holy Communion
- ❖ Personal ideas of the priests about possible new ways of administering this Sacrament

Several open-ended questions allowed us to learn about unique experiences of local parish communities, as well as personal opinions of the clergy about serving Holy Communion during the pandemic. This report includes both an analysis of answers to these open-ended questions and numerous direct quotations.

Data and findings are presented for all parishes combined and individually for the following jurisdictions: Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese, Orthodox Church in America, Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia.

A few examples of key results are given below:

- By the end of July 2020, about half (47%) of all US Orthodox parishes continued to administer the Holy Communion exactly the same way as they did prior to the pandemic. But the percentage of such parishes varies greatly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The parishes of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese (GOA, 61% of parishes) and, especially, of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR, 70%) adhere most strongly to serving Holy Communion in a traditional manner. On the contrary, in the Orthodox Church in America (OCA), only one-quarter (25%) of parishes have retained the traditional way of administering the Eucharist.
- The practice of having multiple reusable spoons (one per communicant) is presently being used by 12% of all American Orthodox clergy and is most common in the OCA (25% of clergy).
- A number of parishes simultaneously offer multiple options (sometimes, by using two chalices) so that parishioners can choose how to commune, depending on their preferences and personal circumstances.
- Over one-third (36%) of the clergy reported that they “have found ways to offer Holy Communion to all or most parishioners: even outside of Liturgy and/or the parish.” These clergy were asked to describe how they distribute Holy Communion to parishioners who are not present at worship services. The report offers an analysis of their responses.
- The manner of administering Holy Communion in a parish is related to the likelihood that its parishioners will refrain from receiving this Sacrament. More than half of the clergy who use either the traditional approach to offering Holy Communion (one spoon and with lips closing on the spoon) or the “one spoon – tilt head back – don’t close the lips” method have reported that some members have stopped receiving Holy Communion out of fear of disease transmission (53% and 68%, respectively). In comparison, only 41% of the priests who sanitize spoons between communicants and 39% of the priests who use multiple reusable spoons (one per communicant) have noted that parishioners are abstaining from Holy Communion.

- Majority (55%) of the clergy believe that “participation in the Holy Communion is critical, but not the manner of its distribution,” while one-third (33%) of the priests disagree with this view (the remaining 12% have no clear opinion about this matter). However, this overall national picture is much more nuanced when looking separately at various jurisdictions. In the GOA and OCA, the clergy who believe that “participation in the Holy Communion is critical, not the manner of its distribution” hugely outnumber those who disagree with such approach. But this is not the case in ROCOR, where percentages of the supporters and opponents of this statement are comparable, or the Antiochian Archdiocese, where more clergy oppose this statement than agree with it.
- The use of multiple reusable spoons (one per communicant) is viewed as acceptable by 40% of US Orthodox clergy. Among the clergy of the four individual jurisdictions, an absolute majority of OCA priests (56%) are willing to accept this method as compared to 36% of Antiochian, 32% of GOA, and 22% of ROCOR clergy. Overall, clergy in the Orthodox Church in America are more willing to accept various new methods of administering the Holy Communion than the clergy of other jurisdictions.
- Clergy were asked: “Would you suggest any other possible method of administering the Holy Communion?” This report offers an overview of the most interesting suggestions offered by the respondents.