

Administering Communion to (Potentially) Contagious Persons

Canon 28 of the Penthekti and Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite

Those who dismiss the Canons of the Church as being too rigorous will actually find some useful information when it comes to controversial issues and the flexibility they permit. A common issue that is often brought up is how to administer Holy Communion in time of plague or widespread viruses or infectious diseases. Though there is no specific Canon that addresses this issue, we do find an old practice (how old I don't know but definitely premodern) that can be helpful which is mentioned in *The Rudder* by Saint Nikodemos the Hagiorite.

In *The Rudder* we read in a footnote by Saint Nikodemos under **Canon 28 of the Penthekti** Ecumenical Synod (which prohibits handing out grapes at the same time as administering Holy Communion; a local custom of the time) the following:

"Hence both Priests and Bishops must manage a way in time of a plague to enable them to administer communion to the sick without violating this Canon; not, however, by placing the Holy Bread in grapes, but in some sacred vessel, so that the dying and the sick may receive it with a tong. The vessel and the tong are to be placed in vinegar, and the vinegar is to be poured into a furnace, or in any other manner that they can that is safer and canonical."

Saint Nikodemos here allows for those who are known to be sick or dying from a plague to receive Holy Communion not from the common chalice and tong, but from a separate chalice and tong. When this was completed, the chalice and tong used for administering Holy Communion to those who were victims of the plague would be placed in vinegar, and when the chalice and tong were sterilized by the vinegar, the vinegar was to be disposed of in a furnace, or in any other canonical and safe way.

It should be emphasized that this advice is for administering Holy Communion to those who are known to be sick and dying from the plague. It is offered out of *economia* and practicality to temper the minds of those who fear being infected with the plague. This does not justify employing this means merely out fear of the possibility of receiving with someone infected. Furthermore, proper protocol for someone receiving Holy Communion is to lean the head back and open the mouth to allow the priest to pour the contents into your mouth, and to touch the tong with your mouth as little as possible if at all.

We must remember, the Holy Gifts, though they are the Body and Blood of Christ, they still retain their original properties of bread and wine. This is why it has been observed that the consecrated bread is susceptible to molding. To prevent molding of the consecrated bread, which could happen with the Reserved Sacrament reserved for the sick and the Presanctified Liturgies, the liturgical books are very specific in their instructions to dip the consecrated bread in the consecrated wine and allow it to dry after cutting it into small pieces. The process of allowing it to dry is described in liturgical books as placing these small consecrated portions on the diskos, and placing the diskos on a heated stone under which is burning coals, and when one side of the bread is dried up then it is turned with the lance to allow for the other side to dry up. When this consecrated bread is dried up, then it is placed on the altar until it cools off. When it is cooled off, it is again placed on the burning stone to be further dried up. When this process is completed, the consecrated host is put away and reserved in the tabernacle on the altar.

Liturgical scholar Professor John Fountoulis mentions that this method is outdated, and today electrical means of heating can be used to accomplish the same thing.