

A Suicidal Church? – A Response

Introduction

St Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “Test all things; hold fast what is good”. When we read anything or hear anything in Church this verse applies. The test of which St Paul speaks is not an emotional response but rather a sober, intelligent discernment of truth as opposed to error. Reading or listening attentively, we may also be aware of some weaknesses in an argument or claims that are not supported by evidence; which for a Christian must be from the Scriptures, the Tradition of the Church *and* the best understandings we have in our own day of any matters that are more suitably addressed by our God given ability to observe and interpret the world that he has made. We should not be obsessively looking for mistakes but neither should we simply approve everything we read or hear, maybe because the author is a man of great significance and holiness in the Church. No one is infallible, after all. Particularly in Orthodoxy we know that the mind of Christ in His Church is a conciliar mind. It derives its strength and wisdom through its catholicity, in other words how it arises from honest exploration and debate within the whole Church. Dialogue within the Church is vital to achieving this reliable conciliar mind.

A rather worrying tendency has developed in Orthodoxy in the last thirty years whereby certain voices are deemed to be beyond criticism, simply on the grounds of the holiness of the persons who have uttered them. Some of the holy elders of our Church who have now reposed in the Lord would be horrified to see the uncritical adulation being given to them by some after their deaths. The Orthodox Church thrives through debate, not by the suppression of views that might be unpopular or challenging.

I have started this evaluation of the recent paper by Archimandrite Gregorios Estephan: “The Suicidal Church, in Body or in Spirit” with a rather long introduction because I would like my readers to understand why I have felt it so necessary to respond to his analysis of our current plight in this pandemic. I offer my thoughts with humility, but also with a bold and clear honesty so that others may judge whether I have any useful insights.

The Basic Problem with the Article

There is much in this paper to welcome but my problem with the article as a whole is that it combines some insightful observations with misleading, if not downright false diagnostics, interpretations and solutions. Allow me to give an example of this from the paper. ¹

¹ The number references here apply to the page numbers once printed of the article which may be found here:-

<https://orthodoxethos.com/post/the-suicidal-church-in-body-or-in-spirit>

Thus the western man was lead from rationalism to nihilism and unto atheism that followed thereafter. (4:3)

Now, certainly, rationalism, nihilism and atheism exist in the perspectives of western man. However, the paper claims that there is a direct line of causation from one to the other. This is easily disproven by considering the origins of each which are often really quite independent of each other albeit often found interwoven in western thought. I do not have the time here to offer further analysis on these matters but I would have to conclude that this statement in the paper is at best a gross simplification and, therefore, misleading or at worst completely unsupportable.

Because the article is basically a paranoid diatribe against the evils of the west, its adornment with the truths of our faith may encourage people to swallow many of these unexamined propositions along with, in places, its deceptive yet alluring plausibility. That is why we need to exercise rigorous discernment and not let ourselves get carried away with the emotion and conviction with which Orthodox truths are so freely mixed together with toxic erroneous assumptions and conclusions. It is true I am using strong language here, but the necessity of this will become clear as my analysis unfolds.

The Media Perpetrate Fear (3:1, 3:2, 3:3)

It is strongly argued in these highlighted sections that hidden forces are exploiting this pandemic for an ungodly goal: “To destroy what remains, in the believers in Jesus Christ, of the hope in the Resurrection and Eternal victory over death” (3:1). This is a “Satanic plan ... promoting fear of the pandemic – introducing people into a state of horror – resulting in the collapse of living faith in Jesus Christ”. The paper identifies the media in several places as the instrument of Satan sowing: “the fear of death in the souls of men, causing them to panic”. Even Christians “become fearful of the death of the body while forgetting that which is related to the spiritual death of the soul”. There is much else on the remainder of this page (3) which repeats and reinforces these points.

This attribution of Satanic plots, aided and abetted by the media, is a persistent aspect of pandemic spiritual paranoia and apocalyptic fervour online. At the popular level this has led to a profusion of conspiracy theories blaming the State, Bill Gates, vaccination and the roll out of 5G. Most of this could be ignored if it were not for the fact that fear, real, imagined or invented, has been weaponised in order to manipulate people into all sorts of positions. Those who, with the Archimandrite, accuse honest, stable and faithful Orthodox Christians of being fearful and betrayers of the Faith know full well what effect,

through false guilt, this can have on the faithful. They may not intended this but the effect is the same, namely, to draw people into their way of thinking. It works. In order to resist these pressures, only by being well informed, not only in the Scriptures and Tradition of the Church, but also in the science of epidemics can vulnerable people resist being sucked into this whirlpool of paranoia. The Church is perceived as being a mighty fortress under siege from the Satanic, God hating forces, and in this of course, the secular institutions of the west, including the media, are easy targets.

Of course, paranoia cannot shut down science, but what it can try and do is push the faithful into a view, never held by the Orthodox Church until recent days, that faith and science are locked in an eternal struggle to the death; more of this later.

Questions of Safety and Risk

After this excursion into alleged manipulated contagious fear, the Archimandrite coyly asks: “Was there no other way or a dispensational solution, taking into account all the health measures, to face this pandemic, without closing the Churches and surrendering to a collective spiritual suicide” (3:3). This is the easiest question to answer, no! Only someone who is deliberately closing his eyes to the dangers of disease transmission in enclosed spaces, notwithstanding any preventative measures can fail to see this.

He then goes on to refer to an objection to his argument that he has obviously had to deal with, namely that by boldly entering the Church with faith: “We are tempting God as if we are inviting something to befall us” (4:1). There then follows an entirely unexceptional pious statement about confronting and withstanding the pandemic by the means of grace.

Of course, when Christians read this they may be beguiled into thinking that God will protect them in Church come what may, and yet the Archimandrite is not himself entirely sure of this pious hope. For instance, on page 8 in the penultimate paragraph he admits that “some faithful could die before the end of the pandemic”. He surely cannot mean by this that they would have died anyway because he freely admits here and elsewhere that the people are risking their lives by going into Church. However, in 4:1, he refers to Christians going “into the catacombs” to offer the Eucharist but let us remember that they did this to *protect* themselves from arrest by the authorities. In this they were avoiding unnecessary risk to protect themselves and all the faithful. Russian Christians in the Soviet era went into the forest to celebrate the Liturgy, they did not set up an impromptu Holy Table in the middle of Red Square! The equivalent in our own day is to serve the Liturgy in a safe place and broadcast it to the faithful. This is our forest! Of course, the Archimandrite does not like broadcasting Liturgies and although all of us recognise that this is far from ideal it is at least a better option than quite unnecessarily digging more graves. So, although I agree that his position is not one of tempting God, it is more seriously an act of sheer and knowing recklessness.

Moreover, it is completely outrageous and unacceptable to accuse faithful priests, lacking any fear of death for themselves, of colluding with the collapse of faith, when all they are trying to do, with other members of society in other spheres, is to prevent the entirely avoidable slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people.

Bravely to expose ourselves to personal danger is one thing but to do so when we put others at risk is indefensible. Such actions are rightly condemned as utterly foolish and repellent and will not be forgiven by the relatives of those who subsequently die because of such reckless policies when the pandemic has ended. Class action lawsuits are to be expected in such cases and permanent damage to the Church's standing in society. Of course, the Archimandrite may be completely fine with that.

The Siege Mentality

Running through the Archimandrite's paper is a siege mentality against the west, modernity, science and reason (4:2, 4:3, 5:1). Although it is certainly true that the Latins erred in the scholastic period and subsequently by supposing that reason alone could build a foundation for faith, it is now equally erroneous for the Christian east to suppose that reason may only safely be exercised within the limits of revelation. In this view, the achievements of the west since the Renaissance will always be regarded with profound suspicion. This constriction of reason to a narrow sphere of religiosity will continue to impoverish Orthodoxy, not just because it refuses to engage with western thought and culture but also because it is hacking away at its own foundations.

The Fathers did not deprecate what we would call today secular learning as this article by a conservative ROCOR priest amply demonstrates². This pandemic is accelerating the pace of a most unwelcome and destructive tendency in the Orthodox Church today, a retreat into an impoverished, semi gnostic disavowal of the goodness of creation and the faculties God has given humans to explore its possibilities and mitigate its dangers. For Orthodoxy to set itself against God's gift of science to men, driven by apocalyptic fervour and thinking is a woeful indication of its plight. Marcion, Mani and Cerinthus would have been proud, but not the Fathers, as St Augustine makes clear:

"Even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the

² <https://www.rocorstudies.org/2011/06/02/gathering-honey-from-flowers-the-fathers-on-secular-learning/>

kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds as being certain from reason and experience.

Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn. The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men. If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life, and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods and on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason?"

[Saint Augustine, On the Literal Meaning of Genesis, Book 1, Chapter 19]

The Problem of Evil

It is when the Archimandrite considers the problems of evil and corruption that we get into really problematic territory. Consider this: "The more evil and corruption are rooted in man's heart, the more he needs tougher temptations to move away from his evil; the goal is man's repentance and salvation. God's wrath is God's righteous judgement" (5:2). Although this sentence has the appearance of being therapeutic, the idea that a loving God would best mend a man's heart, even a heart mired in corruption, by throwing in its path more severe temptations is simply not justified from Scripture or the Fathers and indeed portrays a God that no Christian could truly worship once he was made fully aware of the atrocious enormity of its claim. Even human fathers and mothers do not react in this way in the face of their wayward children.

The Archimandrite seems to think that only wrath will reform humanity and lead to its regeneration, not love itself. His protestations, therefore, that these are the remedies of a loving God fail to convince. He recognises, of course, that the post Christian west has a problem with the Divine wrath and in this he is right, yet the only account he can give of this is to resort to his usual stereotypes of Protestant emotionalism (easy grace), Church modernism and the influence of Ecumenism. In fact,

Alexander Kalomiros in his striking essay: “The River of Fire”³ has a much more compelling response in accounting for western atheism and this has precisely to do with Calvinism’s emphasis on Divine wrath at the expense of his love! I am bound to reflect whether the Archimandrite has fallen into the same error, maybe, ironically through his own exposure to such western influences in his teaching!

When the paper moves on to account for the existence of plagues and disasters, his repudiation of the findings of science of course led him to claim that “all plagues and natural and human disasters have no cause except the sins of men” (6:2). In this he flatly contradicts the teaching of our Lord in Luke 13:4 that the fall of the Tower of Siloam had nothing to do with the sins of those who had died. This widespread assumption that “bad things happen to bad people” although evident in the thought of antiquity, and particularly in the Old Testament, cannot be upheld with integrity today when we know so much more about why bad things happen. The fact that Christ himself seems quite unimpressed by the argument emphasises the point. So, we do not have to resort to symbolic meanings (6:1) to “explain these things away”; their meaning is quite plain. St Basil the Great’s point that suffering can be educative for salvation is quite different from the idea that such sufferings are the expression of Divine wrath (6:2).

Get thee behind me Science!

The sections 7:1 and 8:1 constitute an unsurprising conclusion for the Archimandrite since he appears to believe that science is secular and cannot be trusted, namely that the faithful should resort only to works of piety and prayer to combat the pandemic as of old (7:1). He clearly thinks that this is a sufficient response for the Churches, even if he must know full well that this leaves the rest of the world sinking fast without an answer. Of course, if you are in the ark, who cares for the cries of the damned overwhelmed by the flood? Actually, the rest of the world knows more and more how to handle the pandemic, but what concern is that of the faithful since the world lies beyond the fortress walls of the Church? Will, however, the faithful thank him for walling them off from science and medicine because faith and prayer are supposedly “better”, especially when loved ones start dying. I think not.

These toxic ideas are based on a false premise, namely that science and medicine are of the devil and, therefore, true healing belongs to God and God alone. Such heretical obscurantism masquerading as faith will bring the Orthodox Church into disrepute and set her mission back for decades, if not centuries. Of course, that should be of no concern to Christians because these matters only occupy the barbarians beyond the fortress walls.

³ <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/the-river-of-fire-kalomiros/>

I will not detain myself too much with the rest of his paper for much of it concerns matter with which I will not dispute, namely that Holy Communion cannot be a source of disease. I should point out, however, that those who make this unexceptional argument, either deliberately or through ignorance, always fail to deal with the real problem of viral transmission in this pandemic which concerns surface and utensil contamination and a convection of virus laden aerosols. Of these matters, of course, his paper speaks not a word. Strange that!

My final point in this analysis concerns the reference at 8:2 which I invite you to read again. To summarise:

1. He acknowledges that the Church is not an exclusion zone protecting us from sickness, but those who suffer must rely on the Church alone and her mysteries. Doctors are strictly superfluous.

and finally Martyrdom!

2. Any of the faithful dying in this pandemic, particularly those who have struggled only with the support of the Church's ministrations, die a death that resembles those of the martyrs. Now, whatever anyone might think that conclusion, it is clearly the right of such a person to make that choice for himself. What is NOT his right, under any circumstances, is for him thereby to endanger anyone else's life through onward transmission of the infection. Martyrs do not become knowing killers of others. Clergy who collude with this idea must be implicated in those deaths. As Christians we must never make such life and death decisions without being mindful of the consequences for others. You have a right to die but you do not have a right to kill innocent third parties. That's not martyrdom or anything similar; it's culpable negligence, particularly on behalf of clergy who are charged with keeping the flock safe and that includes the physical aspect. We are not hirelings. As reliable shepherds we sleep in the door of the sheepfold to protect the flock from the wolf. We do not surrender lambs to the slaughter because it might be good for their souls if the wolf tears at their throats. The Lord will say, "why didn't you sleep across the door to the fold?"

Factions, Conflict, Dialogue and Truth

In conclusion, this has been a difficult response for me to write as I am fully aware that grave divisions have opened up in the Body of Christ through this pandemic. If anything is the devil's work, this dissention surely is. When there was division in the Church at Corinth, St Paul wrote concerning conflicting groups: "For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognised among you"

(1 Corinthians 11:19). So we may conclude that this pandemic has actually revealed divisions that were already there, but hidden. Perhaps this is the hope that we should draw from the teeth of these unwelcome conflicts, namely that there is a pressing need for a global dialogue across Orthodoxy to resolve the most important of these differences. Untreated they will continue to poison our relations and break our already fragile unity. If, however, we are prepared to speak the truth in love to one another, partial truths and errors will dissolve as the Holy Spirit illumines and guides our discourse.