

## The Pandemic and You and Me: Integrating Faith and Reason

by Father Emmanuel Kahn

“One of the chief offerings we bring to this world is our uniquely Orthodox Christian understanding of the value of human reason in the spiritual life. Religion and reason are not in contradiction; rather, true faith and sound reason are complementary. Reading and study, scholarship and science, are gifts of God that draw us to Himself; for, as St. Basil says, “we cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him, and there is no knowledge without learning” (*On the Holy Spirit* 1.2).

These words from [an encyclical of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America](#) offer sound advice about how to integrate faith and reason as we live in the midst of this continuing pandemic.

### What Should I and My Household Do Now?

During this month of July 2020 each of us will be confronted with a daily decision: For what purposes should I and my household leave home and return to earlier activities and friendships? This is a question that each household will need to agree among themselves, because what one person in the household does impacts all members of the household. At this time, when the United Kingdom government is urging us to reduce lockdown limitations, this is not an easy question to answer.

Each household “bubble” is a unity—or a disunity—that will influence how many members of the household will be exposed to or expose others to this virus. Rather than relax and rejoice in a return to personal freedom, we are confronted with the need to be alert and rejoice that we are each unique persons and households.

The Covid-19 virus is out of control in some countries (especially the United States, Russia, India and Brazil) and well under control in others (especially the islands of New Zealand, Iceland, Taiwan and Cyprus). Here in the United Kingdom, we are still considered a participant in shared European Union policies until the end of 2020 for potential shared policies to control Covid-19. This attempt to unify the EU approach to control Covid-19 may or may not be successful, but it is important to know that among all the countries in Europe, [the United Kingdom has the highest number of deaths from Covid-19 per 100,000 population](#). So, we can learn a lot from the [success of other countries in protecting their populations](#) or the [failure of others](#). But what should we do now?

### Three Kinds of Health: Public, Economic and Mental

There are at least three kinds of health: public health, economic health and mental health. Deciding what to do requires considering these three forms of health for each household. In the context of public health, sheltering at home as much as possible is the ideal solution. For economic health, continuing to work or returning to work may be essential. For mental health, we need to see family and friends, get outside in nature, relax and switch off the news sometimes. Thus, there is considerable conflict in how best to integrate these three forms of health in each decision we make.

As we reflect upon these three kinds of health, it is important to understand how and why this virus continues to spread. Some infections can occur when we touch surfaces or objects that have the virus and then touch our faces. A few infections can occur outdoors from sustained

(i.e. 15 minutes or more) interaction other people, especially if we talk loudly, cough or are lax about observing social distancing guidelines.

However, the vast majority of infections occur indoors, because [this virus remains active in the air for up to three hours and can easily infect anyone in the room.](#) In all of these situations, regular hand washing with soap and water or hand sanitizer with at least 70% alcohol is essential. Even if mental or economic health would be improved by no longer sheltering in place at home, considerable care needs to be taken with gatherings of any size indoors, especially with attention to good ventilation. Attendance at indoor gatherings (including family events, pubs, restaurants, cinemas, concerts, religious services, museums, gyms and hairdressers) is enticing, but also dangerous. Each household will need to make its own risk assessment: Is the gathering and its benefits worth the possible infections that might occur?

### Three Kinds of Risk: Personal, Geographic and Social

Six months into this virus we have learned a lot about it but still have a lot more to learn; and, unfortunately, the virus has learned a lot about how to continue to infect us, as indicated by 11 million confirmed cases and more than half a million deaths. (See the [regularly updated information from the World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)). In a sense, Covid-19 is thriving rather better than some of us. Why? Because the virus has discovered our weaknesses and is attacking them. Consider three quite different kinds of risk.

#### A) Personal Risk

Each person has a different amount of risk for contracting or spreading the virus. It is still clear that the elderly and those with underlying health conditions such as diabetes are most susceptible to

severe infections, although anyone can have no evident symptoms and still spread the virus. Moreover, younger people are now becoming infected, although usually not with serious symptoms. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that the virus affects not only the respiratory system, but also the brain and other critical organs, such as the kidneys and gut; and recovery can take many weeks. If you experience serious symptoms from virus infection, you appear to acquire considerable future immunity. Mild cases appear to result in less antibodies, but still lead to some immunity to future infections, but it is not yet clear for how long any immunity will last.

### B) Geographic Risk

Clusters of the virus (“hotspots”) can arise at any time in any place. If the Reproduction number (“R”) is above 1 in a local area that means that in that local area, on average, those with the virus are passing it to more than one person. This week the UK Government started telling local authorities how many positive tests are occurring in each postal district. This makes it much easier for local health personnel to test, trace and isolate those with infections or those exposed to the virus. For example, if Leicester knew earlier how many and where infections were occurring, it might have been able to control the infection, instead of remaining in lockdown.

### C) Social Risk

Social risks, including genetic and environmental risks, vary greatly. Some groups of people are more likely to be infected than others. Blood types, race, poverty, crowding in the home, and specific jobs all influence the risk of contracting the virus. In addition to these social risks, behaviour is also highly significant. We each need to

consider not only our own health but the health of others, because our actions could easily determine whether a cluster of infections begins in our own family and the surrounding community.

### So, What Should We Do Now?

Having considered the three kinds of health and the three kinds of risk, we each then need to develop our own personal risk assessments about how to manage this pandemic. We can join four million people in the UK and participate in the Kings College COVID Symptom Study app at [www.joinzoe.com](http://www.joinzoe.com) to track and fight the virus in our area. If local health authorities inform us that a cluster of infections has started in our local area, we will need to adjust our behaviour appropriately, independently of national or international guidelines.

Father Emmanuel is Assistant Priest at St Aidan's Antiochian Orthodox Church, Manchester

6 July 2020