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## The institutional reaction of the Orthodox Churches faced with the initial Covid-19 crisis

### Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has been an important factor of crisis management, harshly affecting the spiritual life of Christians from all over the world, and especially the Orthodox faithful in traditional Orthodox Christian countries. Many of the spiritual leaders in the Christian East sent out letters of encouragement to the faithful, especially as the strict lockdown phase overlapped with the Lenten season, Georgia and Bulgaria being the only Orthodox countries which permitted a limited attendance of the believers in Easter celebrations. In all these addresses, there is a common



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assertion of the value of repentance, as a solution to a merely spiritual crisis and disability. Terms like “suffering”, “hope”, “isolation”, “communion”, “cooperation” or “social responsibility” are scattered throughout their messages, which represent common invitations for the faithful to change for the better. My sense is that the fundamental theological basis of their discourses is rooted in the value of repentance, as it is understood in the Orthodox Church, as a blessed remorse, an ascetic struggle for virtue and acquisition of divine life. Repentance becomes here both a psychological state of contrition, similar to depression, but transformed into empowerment and mastery through a charismatic action of the Holy Spirit.

#### Keywords

Eastern Orthodox Church, Covid-19, pandemic, spiritual disability, repentance

## **1 Introduction**

The coronavirus pandemic evidently changed the landscape of religious activities and spiritual performances, and its spiritual effects are becoming durably embedded in the contemporary religious narrative. Covid-19 pandemic has been an important factor of crisis management, harshly affecting the spiritual life of Christians from all over the world, and especially the Orthodox faithful in traditional Orthodox Christian countries.

A conflict between the social distancing policies imposed by nations in order to combat the spread of illness and the Christian view of community and common partaking of the Holy Cup started to develop early in March 2020. In some countries, the

Orthodox Christians had to face a dramatic shift in the access to the Holy Eucharist, as the traditional form of distributing the Holy Mysteries has been seen as a threat to public health<sup>1</sup> and national churches had to find new ways of distributing communion among the faithful. For instance, the Romanian Orthodox Church published a series of guidelines for the state of alert which show that individual receiving of the Holy Eucharist is available but strictly regulated<sup>2</sup>.

A second example is the Metropolis of Austria, which decided to follow a typikon of Divine Liturgy of St. James in order to avoid using the common spoon<sup>3</sup>. The Eastern Orthodox Church theology is highly centered on the participation in ecclesiastic life, and this unity between systematic theology, sacramental life and asceticism is inspired from the intra-Trinitarian unity<sup>4</sup>.

This theology has strong personalistic nuances which culminate with the understanding of *communion* as the ontological oneness of the human race, the whole Adam<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it is not difficult for us to assess the substantial impact of Covid-19 pandemic for the praxis of the Orthodox Church. The current crisis brought forth at least three important threats to the spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> *Faithful are banned from receiving Holy Communion in Germany*, Orthodox Times, May 14, 2020, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/faithful-are-banned-from-receiving-holy-communion-in-germany/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Îndrumări bisericești pentru starea de alertă*, Basilica, May 14, 2020, <https://basilica.ro/indrumari-bisericesti-pentru-starea-de-alerta/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Austria: Holy Communion to be offered with the typikon of Divine Liturgy of St. James*, May 12, 2020, Orthodox Times, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/austria-holy-communion-to-be-offered-with-the-typikon-of-divine-liturgy-of-st-james/>.

<sup>4</sup> Sofronie Saharov, *Nevoința cunoașterii lui Dumnezeu: scrisori de la Athos* (Alba-Iulia: Reîntregirea, 2013), p. 261.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Sakharov, *I Love, Therefore I Am: The Theological Legacy of Archimandrite Sophrony* (Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), p. 23.

life of the believers from a social and sacramental perspective: isolation (mental health issues), community expression (communal prayers and online streaming), and the impossibility to receive the Eucharist. All of these elements significantly contribute to an increasing state of spiritual disability among the faithful.

The strictest lockdown phase overlapped with the Lenten season, a period usually characterized by long vigils and communal prayers, a sustained ascetic effort anticipating the glorious joy of Resurrection. Georgia and Bulgaria were the only Orthodox countries which permitted a limited attendance of the believers in Easter celebrations<sup>6</sup>. Other countries discouraged or banned the participation of the faithful in common prayer and divine services were broadcasted over the internet, aiming to reduce the distance between celebrants and believers by cultivating a form of communion in spirit and truth.

In this context, many of the spiritual leaders in the Christian East, following an apostolic tradition, sent out letters of encouragement to the faithful at their homes. Some of the letters were sent by the primates of the autocephalous churches and others by the synod of the respective churches. Many statements were directly addressing the Covid-19 crisis, while in other cases, this topic was included in the Easter message usually sent out to all the faithful of a local church. In all these addresses, there is a common assertion of the value of repentance, as a solution to a merely spiritual crisis and disability.

Moreover, this form of spiritual disability can be healed and converted into an ascetic empowerment of the self, as the person transforms his or her residential place in a small church,

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<sup>6</sup> *Coronavirus: Orthodox Easter weekend marked under lockdown*, BBC News, April 19, 2020, <http://bbc.com/news/world-europe-52339183bbc>.

activating the gift of universal priesthood, in no way contradicting the existence of a special gift of sacramental priesthood<sup>7</sup>. Their messages abound in terms like “suffering”, “hope”, “isolation”, “communion”, “cooperation” or “social responsibility”, as an invitation for the faithful to *change for the better*. It is a call for collective repentance, fervent prayer and social action, as the Christian discipleship inherently embodies a social mission, especially in a time of crisis.

My sense is that the fundamental theological basis of their discourses is rooted in the value of repentance, as it is understood in the Orthodox Church, as a humble ascetic struggle for virtue and acquisition of divine life. The prophetic revelation quoted in the famous words of St. Silouan: “Keep thy mind in hell and despair not”<sup>8</sup> becomes thus an emblematic reminder for a despairing generation. Repentance becomes both a psychological state of contrition, similar to depression and spiritual disability, but transformed into empowerment and mastery through a charismatic action of the Holy Spirit.

## 2 Addresses of the Primates of the Orthodox Churches

In the following section I will present the most notable addresses of the primates of the autocephalous Orthodox churches, a non-exhaustive list of messages sent to the faithful during the first wave of Covid-19, in the period of March-May 2020.

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<sup>7</sup> See Sergiï Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), p. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *Wisdom from Mount Athos: The Writings of Staretz Silouan, 1866-1938* (Mowbrays, 1974), p. 87.

## **2.1 Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople**

His All Holiness Patriarch Bartholomew together with the Synod sent out three official statements concerning the Coronavirus pandemic on 11 March, 18 March and 23 April 2020. He sent even a personal message regarding Covid-19 on 19 March 2020. The messages of the Ecumenical Patriarchate are rich in theological content on social and spiritual topics regarding the current crisis. For instance, the first *Communiqué* regarding the Covid-19 pandemic is an invitation to an intensified prayer life for a particular period of time. The outcome of this effort is precisely an ascetic empowerment which transforms a potential spiritual disability into illumination and spiritual strength:

It is considered self-evident that faith in God, as transcendence and not as the abolition of human reason, along with prayer strengthen the spiritual battle of every Christian. Therefore, the Mother Church of Constantinople urges its spiritual children throughout the world to intensify their petitions so that, strengthened and illumined by God, this contemporary tribulation may be overcome<sup>9</sup>.

In his view, Christians need to act responsible, together with the “health authorities for the sake of the common good”<sup>10</sup>, therefore, this is not a time of despair, but of concrete action and social responsibility. This message is reiterated in his personal address sent to all the faithful belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Here, in addition to the social responsibility, a

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<sup>9</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, “Communiqué concerning the COVID-19 (Coronavirus)”, Ecumenical Patriarchate, March 11, 2020, <https://www.ecupatria.org/2020/03/11/communique-concerning-the-covid-19-corona-virus/>.

<sup>10</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, “New communiqué concerning the COVID-19 (Coronavirus)”, Ecumenical Patriarchate, March 18, 2020, <https://www.ecupatria.org/2020/03/18/new-communique-concerning-the-covid-19-coronavirus/>.

new invitation to genuine repentance and a return to a life pleasing to God is formulated:

Now is the time of personal and social responsibility... Let us be careful and protect those around us. And there, from our homes, strengthened by the power of our spiritual unity, let each and every one of us pray for all humankind... We will pass through this period like a journey through the desert to reach the Promised Land, where science, by the grace of God, will overcome this virus... This trial, too, shall pass. The clouds will clear, and the Sun of Righteousness will eliminate the deadly effect of the virus. But our lives will have changed forever. This trial is an opportunity for us to change for the better. In the direction of establishing love and solidarity... Beloved children in the Lord, may the blessing of the Lord, through the intercessions of the All-Holy Mother of God, accompany us in our journey, transform our voluntary isolation into genuine communion, and become our prayer and destination to appreciate the meaning of this, so that we may return to that which is true, to that which is pleasing to God! Have courage! And may God be with us!<sup>11</sup>

Any state of spiritual disability that may arise because of the strict isolation measures needs to be transformed into a new and refreshed perspective on the value of communion. Human beings are invited to a shift of perspective from an old self prone to experience pain, disorientation and despair to a new self which is able to enthusiastically share the love of God with the fellow people affected by this crisis.

## ***2.2 Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East***

His Beatitude John, together with the Antiochian Hierarchs, signed a statement regarding the current Covid-19 crisis in

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<sup>11</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, "Message of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Regarding Covid-19", March 19, 2020, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, <https://www.goarch.org/-/message-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-covid-19>.

Damascus on 16 March 2020. This message is a short reiteration of the value of life as a sacred gift and the general call to preserve it from every danger by fully cooperating with the public authorities:

Life is God's "sacred gift" and each pastor and faithful is called to safeguard and preserve it in a way that pleases the Creator, according to His will and to the status of man as beloved and redeemed. The Church turns to the intercession of the Virgin Mary and all the saints, intensifying her prayers and clinging to "the hope that does not disappoint" (Rom. 5:5). As she faces this great tribulation, the Church relies on the "Divine providence" and aspires to have everyone be united in confronting this tribulation, having faith in this providence and working with it. Consequently, the Church calls on all believers to offer prayers and daily supplications in their homes, and with their family members, in order that we all share the great and one hope in God, in a time that reminds us of our human limitations. Also, the Church invites her children to pray to the Lord God that He may have abundant compassion on His people. May He grant healing to the sick and consolation to those tormented and suffering under the burden of these difficult days. May He inspire those who work in public affairs to deal with this crisis in wisdom and good management, and bless the efforts of the workers in the health and hospital sectors and all volunteers. May the Lord God protect all our children and fellow citizens from all danger and evil<sup>12</sup>.

The important element here is the value of "hope" as a key-element for overcoming any spiritual crisis. The firm hope is

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<sup>12</sup> *Patriarchate of Antioch, "A Statement issued by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East", Antiochian Patriarchate, March 16, 2020, <https://www.antiochpatriarchate.org/en/page/a-statement-issued-by-the-greek-orthodox-patriarchate-of-antioch-and-all-the-east/2367/>.*



founded on Christ's Resurrection which is going to be fulfilled in the life of each human person throughout the ages.

### **2.3 Patriarchate of Jerusalem**

On 11 April 2020 His Beatitude Theophilus sent out an Easter message from his office in Jerusalem. In this message he addressed the issue of reconciliation of humanity in Christ, encouraging the believers to trust in God's power to heal any disease and suffering:

Ever since, the Church, which according to the true words of the Lord "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18), continues His mission on earth. It preaches Christ Incarnate, Crucified and Resurrected, and baptizes in His Name those who believe in Him, sanctifies them with its sacraments and prays for the reconciliation of humanity and for the whole world. It supports the suffering man with all its strength, prays to our Lord Jesus Christ, the healer of souls and bodies, for the cessation of the ongoing pandemic of the current virus, for the healing of those affected by it and for His mercy for those who died by the virus so mercilessly, in the certainty that "though he was crucified through weakness, yet he liveth by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but we shall live with him by the power of God toward you" (2 Cor. 13:4)<sup>13</sup>.

This is a message of repentance which is understood as a turn towards God in lament of affliction, with the aim of restoring human's relationship with God and communion with the Church.

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<sup>13</sup> Patriarch Theophilus, "Easter 2020 Message of His Beatitude the Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilus III", Jerusalem Patriarchate, April 11, 2020, <https://en.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/blog/2020/04/11/easter-2020-message-of-his-beatitude-the-patriarch-of-jerusalem-theophilus-iii/>.

#### **2.4 Patriarchate of Georgia**

His Holiness Ilia, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, in his Easter message delivered on 19 April 2020, encouraged the faithful to stay strong in their faith: “We should not be afraid of temptation, the Christian takes problems with gratitude and sees God’s hand in everything... and at the same time tries to find the right solution in the current situation”<sup>14</sup>. Georgia was one of the few countries which did not turn the public services into private representations, but allowed the believers to fully partake of the Holy Mysteries, by adopting some sanitary regulations.

#### **2.5 Patriarchate of Serbia**

The Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church delivered a message regarding Covid-19 crisis on 16 March 2020<sup>15</sup>. On 16 April 2020 His Beatitude Irinej sent out an Easter message from his office in Belgrade. His message is strongly centered on the value of repentance in front of a distressing and challenging time:

This year, we are arriving at and celebrating Pascha under difficult circumstances, in such distress as in which we have rarely welcomed and celebrated it in the past. We live in the days of a pandemic which has suddenly befallen humanity. The whole world is affected and threatened by a single virus. Will the proud and selfish man of today draw any conclusion from that fact? Or will he continue, without repentance and without love, to persevere in the suicidal project of creating his false worldly paradise in which there is no place for ei-

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<sup>14</sup> Patriarch Ilia, “The Easter message of the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia”, Georgian Patriarchate, April 19, 2020, <https://patriarchate.ge/news/2605>.

<sup>15</sup> Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church, “Communique of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church”, March 16, 2020, [http://www.spc.rs/eng/communique\\_holy\\_synod\\_bishops\\_serbian\\_orthodox\\_church\\_1](http://www.spc.rs/eng/communique_holy_synod_bishops_serbian_orthodox_church_1).

ther God or for man as a godly, spiritual being? ... Above all, we pray to the Lord God to deliver us from this epidemic and similar dangers! Let us pray to God, let us participate regularly and actively in the Divine Liturgy, repent of our sins, and take care of our own health and that of others! This is an opportunity for us to think carefully about ourselves and the whole world. Look, one virus has shaken and brought to its knees the whole world and put the health and lives of millions of people at risk! "Calm down, O you prideful man!" – advised Dostoevsky in his time. His message is, we would say, more relevant today than it was when it was delivered<sup>16</sup>.

This is an invitation to a better understanding of the value of spiritual life, in a context of increasing secularization and technical innovations and advancements. Moreover, it is a direct invitation to repentance through humility and realism.

## ***2.6 Patriarchate of Romania***

His Beatitude Daniel of Romania largely talked about Covid-19 crisis in his homilies and Easter sermon. He even sent out a special message dealing with this subject on 12 May<sup>17</sup>. In one of his sermons he explicitly talked about the danger of falling into despair and the spiritual disability which can appear due to coronavirus developments:

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<sup>16</sup> Patriarch Irinej, "Patriarchal Paschal Encyclical 2020", Serbian Orthodox Church, April 16, 2020, [http://www.spc.rs/eng/patriarchal\\_paschal\\_encyclical\\_2020](http://www.spc.rs/eng/patriarchal_paschal_encyclical_2020).

<sup>17</sup> Patriarch Daniel, "Spiritual Message in Times of Pandemic", Basilica, May 12, 2020, <https://basilica.ro/en/patriarch-daniel-spiritual-message-in-times-of-pandemic-video/>. This message is presented also in Adrian Sorin Mihalache, *The Pandemics of our Civilization: CoVid-19, SARS, MERS, Avian Influenza. Some Scientific Data, Conspiracy Theories and Spiritual Insights* (International Journal of Orthodox Theology, 11-1, 2020), p. 121.

We must not fall into despair during this period, but let us strengthen ourselves in faith... If we do not stay home usefully, the home-staying can make us sick even if we do not get the virus. By becoming discouraged. If the fear of the disease becomes a psychosis or a collective neurosis, we damage our mental health even if physical health is not affected by this virus that has spread the disease throughout the world<sup>18</sup>.

His special message regarding Covid-19 pandemic is an invitation towards philanthropic activities, as the visible sign of the love for neighbours:

Consequently, step by step, diseases and physical death appeared, as well as disruption in nature with negative effects on life. However, the love of God – the Creator for humanity and for all creation remains constant in history, because God wants to free the human being from sin as a selfish way of life, from sickness and death... From this perspective, the human being's life on earth makes full sense if it is understood as a time of the people's spiritual preparation to enter into God's eternal love and joy, if the people have loved God and their fellow human beings during their earthly life (Matthew 25:31-46)... The state of pandemic calls us to transform suffering into hope and isolation into a desire for more communion among people... At the end of this pandemic, we trust that God will enlighten all people to better understand that only through faith, hope and love, expressed in good actions for other fellow human beings, the times of trial and suffering can be overcome and His peace and joy can be felt<sup>19</sup>.

Here, Patriarch Daniel calls for a change for better, a transformation of isolation into deep spiritual communion through

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<sup>18</sup> Patriarch Daniel, "Predică la Sărbătoarea Bunei Vestiri", Basilica, March 25, 2020, <https://basilica.ro/en/patriarch-daniel-urges-believers-to-look-after-mental-health-amid-coronavirus-outbreak-mother-of-god-is-of-great-help/>.

<sup>19</sup> Patriarch Daniel, "Spiritual Message in Times of Pandemic".

philanthropic activities and personal prayer. Repentance is thus understood as an ascetic and transformative process of the self which overcomes any suffering and brings spiritual joy.

## **2.7 Patriarchate of Bulgaria**

His Holiness Neophyte of Bulgaria, on 23 March 2020, delivered a message to believers noting the life-threatening consequences of the current crisis:

In times of trials, our nation is being threatened by the expanding pandemic, when the disease is close to us and we see the suffering of the people, we are all called to be responsible towards our neighbour, our nation and our Motherland... Having stayed in our homes, in front of the home icon, still and with repenting hearts, let us fix our eyes on Christ the Saviour with a prayer for healing the sick and for supporting our doctors, our government and army and all who do not save their efforts in these hard times<sup>20</sup>.

A part of this message was reiterated by the Synod on 18 April 2020 in the Easter letter sent out to Bulgarian believers:

Let us, together with the grief from the tragedy experienced by all, but also with strong faith and hope in the General Resurrection and in the eternal life, use what is happening as an occasion to turn inside to ourselves and to ask ourselves how we are living today – each of us, individually, and all together, as a society... Today, on the day of the ever-victorious Resurrection of Christ, but also of the spreading disaster among us, these and other similar questions are facing us as never before and are waiting for our response. Would we, together with the God-Man our Lord Jesus Christ and the whole Church, choose the side of life, collecting treasures for eternal life, or would we store up our treasures “on the earth, where moth and rust consume and where

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<sup>20</sup> Patriarch Neophyte, “Patriarchal Address on the global Covid-19 pandemic”, Bulgarian Patriarchate, April 2, 2020, <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/en/news.php?id=318642>.

thieves break in and steal” (Mt. 6:19)? Would we, as faithful children and co-workers of God, give the best of ourselves for the accomplishment of God’s economy for the world and the creation, or would we be negligent for God’s holy will?<sup>21</sup> Covid-19 pandemic is visibly seen in this message as a tragedy which should reiterate the value of genuine repentance, both personal and collective. This is deeply rooted in the Eastern Orthodox anthropology, where the Adamic fall has ramifications for the whole human posterity.

### **2.8 The Church of Greece**

The Easter message of His Beatitude Ieronymos delivered on 14 April 2020 is an important contribution to our thesis, as he talks about the way Church services and religious gatherings have been affected by the pandemic:

Borders are closing, we take distances in our social relations and within our homes. We are counting wounds, and unfortunately also heavy losses. Some people say that many things may change forever. It is clear that unbridled consumerism has given us no answers to the problem... Our worship was injured this year... In this difficult time with the additional difficulties, for our country, in our border, let us have hope... The postmodern man is stripped naked. It is clear that with dowry narcissism and unbridled consumerism we have no answers to this problem. We feel deeply wounded in our worship life. Against the wear and tear, the Grace of the Resurrection is enlightened. The Resurrection of the Lord, this act of God in History, paved the way for the complete transcendence of death, spiritual and biological<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, “Patriarchal and Synodal Paschal Epistle”, Bulgarian Patriarchate, April 18, 2020, <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/news.php?id=320494>.

<sup>22</sup> Archbishop Ieronymos, “Archbishop of Athens: Let’s turn our homes into churches”, *Orthodox Times*, March 20, 2020,

Archbishop of Athens talks about the wounds in the worship life which are an expression of spiritual disability or spiritual death. The solution to this crisis is seen in the transcendence of death, a transformative process of the Holy Spirit.

### 3 Defining “spiritual disability” in Covid-19 context

In Covid-19 context, spiritual disability has been closely connected to the effects of self-isolation and Eucharistic ban. As we identified in the messages of the representatives of the Orthodox Churches, some of them addressed the many facets of the dangers of self-isolation as a pathway to sadness, negativity, discouragement and ultimately depression. Others speak about the liturgical life of the Church and the deep wounds Christians suffered because of the restrictions in communal gathering. For a Church that is centred on the Eucharistic life, the impossibility to partake the common worship becomes a dramatic consequence of Covid-19 pandemic. The Orthodox Church is primarily a society of people and the liturgical expressions of the faith require a physical presence as the worship engages all human’s senses. Therefore, when we talk about spiritual disability we refer mostly to the effects of self-isolation and social-distancing regulations for the spiritual life of the faithful: fear, sadness and depression. In Eastern Orthodox terminology, these effects are part of a broader concept of *acedia*, which disorders reasoning, desiring and acting<sup>23</sup>.

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<https://orthodoxtimes.com/archbishop-of-athens-lets-turn-our-homes-into-churches/>.

<sup>23</sup> C. D. Jones, *The Problem of Acedia in Eastern Orthodox Morality* (Studies in Christian Ethics 33-3, SAGE Publishing, 2020), pp. 336–351.

#### **4 Towards a solution for a despairing crisis: from disability to empowerment**

The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, in his message regarding Covid-19, talks about a form of ascetic empowerment of the self as a result of home isolation where the prayer for all mankind strengthens the spiritual unity in Christ<sup>24</sup>. Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens extended this form of ascetic empowerment adding an ecclesiological dimension to the private prayer by turning “every house into a small church”<sup>25</sup>. These two key-elements are essential in our thesis: Covid-19 crisis added a new light in the understanding of sacramental priesthood in the Orthodox Church. Together with the small church from home, Christians can immediately activate the universal priesthood function which was granted through baptism and can become ascetics and priests, offering the self as a burned sacrifice.

It can be said that the Orthodox Church proposes a realistic approach to Covid-19 pandemic, considering repentance as the main weapon against the destructive effects of a crisis of isolation and chronic loneliness. The Christian starts a new subjectivity of an ascetic in the small Church, belonging to the greater communion of love and through the grace of repentance he or she overcomes any spiritual disability. The words of Saint Silouan the Athonite are perhaps more actual than ever: “Keep thy mind in hell and despair not”<sup>26</sup>. The faithful of the Orthodox Church are invited to fully assume a state of continuous repentance, in a state of spiritual realism, but never lose hope in the

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<sup>24</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, “Message of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Regarding Covid-19”.

<sup>25</sup> Archbishop Ieronymos, “Message from Archbishop Ieronymos for Easter”, Romfea, April 14, 2020, <https://www.romfea.gr/ekklisia-ellados/36483-minuma-arxiepiskopou-ieronumou-gia-to-pasxa>.

<sup>26</sup> Sophrony Sakharov, *The Writings of Staretz Silouan*, p. 87.



transformative power of the Resurrection. Pleading for God's mercy is an ascetic initiative, strongly encapsulated in the Eastern Orthodox Theology, which ultimately empowers the human person by the transformative gift of the Holy Spirit:

The only form of dejection we should cultivate is the sorrow which goes with repentance for sin and is accompanied by hope in God... This "godly sorrow" nourishes the soul through the hope engendered by repentance, and it is mingled with joy. That is why it makes us obedient and eager for every good work: accessible, humble, gentle, forbearing and patient in enduring all the suffering or tribulation God may send us<sup>27</sup>.

This is where the solution resides, in the understanding of the "godly sorrow" as the simple way of converting the dejection into a blessed remorse, which is easily noticed in the writings of St John Cassian, as an exponent of the large Eastern Orthodox patristic tradition.

## Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic brought forth important threats to the spiritual life of the Christians from a social and sacramental perspective which significantly contribute to an increasing state of spiritual disability among the faithful. This study aimed to explore and describe how this crisis has been perceived by the majority of the Orthodox Churches around the globe. The contemporary religious narrative has been widely marked by the addresses of the leaders of the Orthodox Churches which together form a consistent framework dealing with the effects of spiritual disability among the faithful. In the majority of these

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<sup>27</sup> Nicodemus, Makarios, G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, Kallistos, *The Philokalia: The complete text* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 88.

statements, human beings are invited to a shift of perspective from a state of depression and hopelessness to a healthy state of increased prayer and philanthropy coupled with the paschal joy in the hope of Resurrection. The study noted that repentance is the main weapon against the destructive effects of a crisis of isolation which transforms any form of acedia into empowerment and mastery through a charismatic action of the Holy Spirit.