



## Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union

Place de Jamblinne de Meux 40, 1030 Brussels  
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### The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Churches – Churches' Social Teachings in response to COVID

- EPP webinar -

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Dear Friends,

First of all, many thanks to Mr. Holvenyi and Mr. Olbrycht and the entire EPP Working Group on Intercultural and Religious Dialogue for conveying this meeting and thus providing us a very much needed opportunity to reflect – and to share our reflections – on *how the still ongoing CoVid19 pandemic has been influencing the life of the Church* and *how exactly could - and actually do – the Churches respond to the current crisis*. Pressed, as I am, to keep my talk brief, I will try to limit my intervention to only three (brief!) points on each of the two aspects – **the impact** on, and **the response** of the Church, respectively:

The impact

- i) The most obvious – and the most widely felt - effect of the pandemic on the life of the Church was that **the faithful could not gather for communal worship**, and this **precisely during “the highlight” of the liturgical year**, i.e. for Easter and, in some countries, even for Pentecost.

Anyone having at least a basic knowledge of Orthodox doctrine and life, knows that we Orthodox are **liturgical** and **sacramental** *par excellence*. “Liturgical” means that the life of the Church is not only centered on, but constantly made anew (re-created, realized) in the experience of the gathering of the people round the altar for the celebration of, and the partaking into, the Eucharist. “Sacramental” means that we partake of divine grace *through* the very concrete *material* things of this world, which we see, hear, smell, touch and eat.

In light of these observations, you can easily imagine that the impact of the quarantine measures on the life of our Church could hardly be overestimated. At this point, we should also remark that there were also (a few) countries which – to the dismay of epidemiologists and other like experts! - largely refrained from imposing restrictions on religious gatherings, or at least from imposing a total ban, such as majority-Orthodox Bulgaria and Georgia, or, closer to us, the Netherlands.



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But we will come back to this.

- ii) Some, at times, said that we Orthodox tend to be *exclusively* liturgical, in the sense that the liturgy is pretty much what we usually do, failing to extend the liturgical experience beyond the walls of the church. Yet, the 2<sup>nd</sup> effect that the pandemic had on the life of our Church was precisely **to intensify and to make more visible the huge contribution of the Church to the efforts to alleviate the numerous and diverse forms of suffering caused by the virus and by the side-effects of the measures imposed to contain its transmission**. As usually, the hardest hit were the poorest and the socially marginalized members of society, so it was there that the Church tried to focus its work. For instance, in Romania only, the assistance offered by the Orthodox Church to those in need, since the beginning of the crisis, is valued at around 5 mil. euro: medical equipment was bought for many hospitals, many monasteries offered accommodation for persons who had to stay in isolation, food and medication was offered to the needy, tablets were bought for children who had to continue their education online but did not have the means to do so.
  
- iii) Last but certainly not least, the pandemic crisis has occasioned a *re-launch of a (centuries-old) debate on Church-State relations*. More to the point: as we already said and all know, most countries applied quarantine measures which included a quasi-total ban on communal worship. While - with very scarce exceptions - nobody objected to the necessity for *some* protective measures to be taken by churches, just like any other social actor, many expressed - and still do express - a very serious concern when it comes to the *proportionality* (or, better said, lack thereof!) and *discriminatory nature* of these measures. "The right to religious freedom - the argument goes - is not to be mixed up with the right to go to the theater or to the tanning salon," as, unlike the latter, the former is enshrined in, and guaranteed by, most European national constitutions, as well as by a number of European and International conventions. Some other questions being raised: "How exactly did the State determine which activities are essential for society and which are not? Does the State have the authority to decide upon this matter for all of its citizens? And, when the State does decide that religion is not essential to one's life, doesn't the State become an organ of a secularistic approach to life and society, to the detriment of a religious one? And isn't this precisely the upside-down version



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of the danger that secularism itself claims to want to protect us from, i.e. giving to another the right to decide on what should I believe?" Finally: "How justifiable is it for a State to allow for the reopening of a multitude of shops and businesses, *under strict sanitary protective measures*, while at once refusing the right of the faithful to commonly practice their faith, *under those very same protective measures*? Which exactly is the indisputable argument that should make one believe that shoppers going out in (sometimes quite crowded) stores to buy food, clothes or whatever else have an ability to protect themselves and others from illnesses, that believers going to Church do not possess?"

Summing up this point, I will only say that these are all questions that are still waiting for answers, and throwing them to the recycle bin should not be an option for an open, transparent and democratic society. Moreover, although they are easily dismissed by some circles, they seem to have proven strong enough arguments for the highest juridical courts in Germany and France to declare the total ban on religious worship illegal, as it is "disproportionate in nature" and caused "damage that was seriously and manifestly illegal" (France's Council of State decision).

### The response

Let us now turn to the response and to what the theology and the practice of the Orthodox Church could offer us in further dealing with this unique situation. I will also make three points:

- i) By and large, the Orthodox Churches have *quickly realized, and acted upon, their responsibility to protect the faithful and the other members of society*, and especially the most fragile and vulnerable amongst them. As we already said, this was done not only in the negative (advising people to keep away from crowded places and to follow the instructions of the sanitary authorities), but also in the positive – by making huge efforts to help those affected. Pastors have many times expressed the faith that it is not first and foremost care for oneself, but care and love for our neighbor that should guide us in sailing through these troubled times. In the words of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople: "that which is at stake is not our faith – it is the faithful!". Faith, nevertheless, has proven to be a strong and reliable source of power and courage, not least for those who selflessly put their health and



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wellbeing at risk in order to provide care and relief to us all: medical personnel, social workers and others carrying out essential roles for the functioning of our society.

- ii) Secondly, as we are sailing past the peak point in the number of infections and the situation seems to become more manageable from the point of view of the capacity of the health care systems to cope with the numbers of those infected *and* requiring professional health assistance, *the need becomes obvious to carefully look back and see what we did good and what we did bad in our common efforts to best deal with this virus*. There obviously still is a great deal of information to be discovered, refined, confirmed, but we absolutely need to use what we already found out - and this is a lot more than what we knew just a few months ago - in order to arrive at the best balance between limiting the harm done by the virus and the harm caused by the measures meant to contain it. Of course, the guiding principle in this search, from a Christian perspective, could only be the unique and priceless value of each and every human life, from conception to natural death. Yet, we find out, for instance, that great numbers of lives are being lost due to the blocking of the health care systems which are unilaterally focused on dealing with the epidemic. We certainly need to look into this!
  
- iii) Finally, I would like to highlight the pressing need for the people to have *accurate and reliable information on the evolution of this situation*. It is only on this basis that we will be able to address the challenge in an efficient manner, as coherent societies. Given the above mentioned gaps in our knowledge of this virus, it is but natural to have a concert of perspectives on how we should best deal with it. Appropriate space should be created in the public *fora* for these – at times concurrent – perspectives to be debated and thus allow the outlining of the best, most efficient way forward. The hasty labelling as “fake news” of any piece of information that contradicts the so-called official narrative might prove to be totally counter-productive in ensuring social consensus. And this is especially obvious when we all know that this very “official narrative” has – naturally, under these circumstances - changed repeatedly, and sometimes even drastically, over the past few months, whether we talk of national or international organizations.



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I conclude with a few words that Patriarch Daniel of Romania addressed to the faithful one month ago and which very well encompass the Orthodox perspective on the times that we are living: "At present, the state of pandemic could be also understood as *a test or a verification of the spiritual state of people*, especially of the intensity of their love towards God and fellow human beings.

In the pandemic state, *prayer* is a spiritual source of peace and hope, while spiritual and *material solidarity* with those who are suffering is a source of courage and joy.

The state of pandemic calls us to *transform suffering into hope* and **isolation into a desire for more communion among people.**"

Rev. George Valcu,  
CROCEU General Secretary