

A Pandemic Shock. How Key Orthodox Churches in Ukraine Faced the Challenge of COVID-19

by Tetiana Kalenychenko

The pandemic exposed the weaknesses and lines of polarization that were present in the church environment in Ukraine. Although the churches have had different reactions to these global events, in general they have seen the outward manifestation of both internal and external challenges. However, the crisis became an important space for solving internal problems, which only intensified and deepened after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, and required much faster and more critical reactions of religious leaders on different levels.

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The challenges of the pandemic exposed the internal problems of churches and the Orthodox environment, in Ukraine in particular. They found a number of important consequences that concern not only ministers and parishioners, but also the whole society. The pandemic has demonstrated lines of polarization and conflict that have manifested themselves at various levels: between parishioners of different churches and jurisdictions; a crisis of insufficient communication and coordination, as well as trust between Orthodox priests within the same church; lack of communication, understanding and clarification regarding the service from the hierarchs to the ministers, as well as the detachment of the church leadership from the realities on the ground. The pandemic affected both existential and everyday aspects, such as the economic standard of living of priests, who were forced to independently find additional sources of income in order to cover at least communal services for the temple, not to mention their own comfort. The new crisis made them think about the main role and mission of the church, its understanding as a community of people, not a building, and also transformed the perception of the sacraments and the use of the latest technologies, which, on the one hand, increased the opportunities for the participation of those parishioners who could not be physically present in the church, and on the other hand significantly reduced the motivation to participate directly in the liturgy.

Although the churches have had different reactions to these global events, in general they have had the opportunity to see the outward manifestation of both internal and external challenges and respond to them in their own way. I propose to consider examples in the three churches that we studied the most – Ukrainian Orthodox Church (of Moscow Patriarchate) (UOC(MP)), Orthodox Church of

Ukraine (OCU) and Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC).

The OCU priests took a significant initiative in adjusting the rituals to make them safer for people on official level. This is an evidence of the readiness of the ministers for grassroots democracy and initiative. However, it was not always approved by the church hierarchy. The question of the Eucharist distributed through a spoon or directly through the hands has become a cross-cutting and certain trigger for some believers or priests, which we see through the whole study and every conversation. For a certain circle of priests, this is perceived quite logically and does not raise questions as an ancient practice of the Church. "A part of the clergy is horrified to think about returning to the spoon," – one of the respondents claimed. For others, it is a certain allusion to Catholic practices, which are considered alien. At the same time, some believers showed considerable conservatism, refusing to receive communion through their hands, because the spoon became a symbol of stability for them and was considered a mandatory element of communion. Not all priests could explain the difference and why this kind of Eucharist is now safer. The OCU priests, in contrast to other churches, mentioned a lot of changes in their daily habits: new online Bible readings, online donations (through e-banking), daily sanitation, changing the schedule of liturgies to accommodate people in smaller but more frequent groups, praying for doctors and sick people, etc. Most importantly, the OCU priests did not feel that they were forced to change their practices by their leadership. Instead, they argued that their leaders acted reasonably and clearly communicated that the virus constitutes a severe threat. Although such a supposedly democratic reaction of the OCU hierarchs may indicate readiness to accept and nurture a grassroots initiative, this issue is not so clear-cut. So, unlike the UOC(MP), the leadership of the OCU indeed reacts more flexibly and gives priests the opportunity to make their own decisions.

Especially at the beginning of the pandemic, it was completely unclear how to respond to calls if one of the parishioners came to serve the sick; how to visit those who are sick with coronavirus, protect yourself, protect his family and at the same time fulfill your duties as a minister; how to change the sacraments of weddings, funerals and baptisms in order to act within the framework of the law and not provoke a surge of disease in the territorial community. Some priests of the OCU shared in an interview that they proposed to the regional leaders to convene an urgent meeting in order to make joint decisions and act uniformly, but this never happened. Therefore, against the background of the general recommendation of church leaders to act within the framework of the law, each parish adopted its own rules and changed them in order not to be exposed to danger. This caused a lot of dissatisfaction and discussions among the believers, who could now choose a priest who still gives communion from a spoon, conducts a funeral at home or not, allows more people to be in the church, and so on. The challenge of the pandemic can teach church structures that it is worth discussing joint solutions, giving some

joint instructions and being ready to listen to ordinary ministers on the ground, who often offer creative solutions that not only reduce the risks of infection, but also return the church to its traditions and bring the believers together among themselves.

The Greek Catholic priests provided similar answers. At the same time, it was in this church that the hierarchs gave clear instructions that were used in churches in different regions, in both cities and villages. This did not eliminate the problem that certain ministers still wanted to follow their own way, but it made it possible to refer to direct church documents and removed the level of tension for the parishioners. However, when they talked about using new digital tools, they were more positive than the OCU priests. Still, there are some personal cases when not all priests followed recommendations. Yet, they are the most disciplined ones. An important aspect in the case of the ministry of the UGCC during the pandemic is a more structured response, including the church leadership, as well as public communication on behalf of the church itself, which made it possible to clarify certain doubts of the faithful and provide points of reference in order not to lose access to spiritual nourishment and continue to attend church. However, this did not save even the congregation of the UGCC, which is one of the most organized, from the partial loss of believers who switched to online formats for meeting their spiritual needs, which also had a negative impact on the daily service and safety of ministers in the field.

The entire spiritual environment of the UOC(MP) found itself in the middle of not only a public scandal, but also a misunderstanding of how priests should continue their ministry in the conditions of the pandemic. In the public space, the reactions of the leaders of the UOC(MP), who at first rejected the very existence of COVID as a phenomenon, served as a reason to label believers and ministers of the church as pro-Russian (since similar reactions were seen only from the Russian Orthodox Church) and those that pose a threat to health and safety other Ukrainians. Even after recognizing the existence of the pandemic, the situation could not be substantially leveled. The misunderstanding also concerned the internal dynamics among UOC(MP) clerics, who had to take responsibility and try to overcome prejudices against their own church. From their perspective, the UOC(MP) was keen on rituals that they carefully nurtured and preserved, making them the pillar of their faith. For them, changing the rituals might trigger changes in how people view the church and weaken their faith. One of the key topics for discussion was the sacrament of communion. The UOC(MP) priests claimed that their leaders insisted on keeping regular ways of distributing Holy Communion, by spoon, because they feared making any changes. They also claimed that the church's leadership perceived its members as conservatives that would not appreciate the change. The UOC(MP) priests complained that they felt discriminated against by local authorities and governmental policies – in contrast to the OCU priests. Even

further, one of the respondents reported that they were forced to use the state contractors to film and broadcast their liturgies.

To summarize, all respondents from all religious groups acknowledged that the pandemic is an existential threat for churches. Importantly, the pandemic has become a global crisis that has affected basic everyday practices at the level of even a rural parish. Due to the loss of a certain number of parishioners, due to the competition between ministers who use different ways to change the sacraments under the conditions of the pandemic, each minister faced the challenge: what do we perceive as the church and its community? What should keep people together besides rituals like the Sunday liturgy? How to increase the level of spiritual awareness and practices under the conditions of remote contact? How to bring people back to the church by using the latest technology? Why should the church as a special place be attractive to young people? All these questions were and remain even more relevant for all priests, regardless of the jurisdiction and their scope of service. More importantly, they envisage the main challenge in how to find new and deep meaning in the rituals that are executed online or individually, and not through shared collective religious experiences. While these perceived threats are common for all groups, some churches reported unique challenges. Pandemic services, thus, were used to draw another line of division. In contrast, the issue for the UOC(MP) stems from the opposite situation – because their flocks are more devoted to the traditional rituals, they tend to ignore the anti-pandemic measures. In any way of church dynamics, pandemic opened up latent problems in every confession. “Thanks to the pandemic, we saw what works in our church, what doesn’t, and it’s time for all of us to think about communication with the parish,” – a UGCC respondent mentioned after one year of service during the pandemic.

The challenges of the pandemic have once again revealed an identity discrepancy in the Orthodox environment of Ukraine, where the national can exceed the religious. That is, belonging to the Orthodox Church, which reflects the national identity of a Ukrainian, turns out to be the primary motivation for religious affiliation. This leads to the fact that as soon as the conditions for regular service change, part of the parishioners stop participating in spiritual gatherings, because they consider belonging to the church more important than practical faith and religious practices. This particularly applies to both public and hidden forms of confrontation between the UOC(MP) and the OCU.

Another common challenge faced by all churches is the lack of discussion and understanding of ancient practices, which are not only known, but also actively applied under various social challenges. The question of the Eucharist, distributed through spoons or in hand, became the most critical, not only because of hygiene standards, but also because of the possibility of a more democratic style of service. In most cases, at the institutional level, we observed the transfer of the responsibility of the church leadership to the personal responsibility and

awareness of the priest. Therefore, he had to find out on his own what could be changed, what the conditions for service from the local self-government and the police could be, and how seriously they should be taken. How to ensure a minimal level of security and conduct explanatory work among parishioners, etc. All these dilemmas and challenges were mostly overcome by the ministers on their own instead of being able to discuss them with the church leadership and understand how exactly to organize the spiritual life of the community further.

The pandemic exposed the weaknesses and lines of polarization that were present in the church environment. This affected all churches, and also exposed the problem of belief and belonging to the church practice of Ukrainians, who prefer to rely on cultural religious affiliation instead of direct participation in spiritual life. However, the pandemic crisis for the Orthodox environment of Ukraine became an important space for solving internal problems, which only intensified and deepened after the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, which took place on February 24, 2022 and required much faster and more critical reactions of religious leaders as in the church leadership, as well as on the ground.

About the author

Tetiana Kalenychenko Ph. D. in Sociology of Religion, her thesis work about “Religious component in Socio-Political Conflict in Ukraine 2013-2017 years”. Together with other colleagues, created an organization called “Dialogue in Action” that aims to develop culture of dialogue by uniting secular and religious leaders in the fieldwork. Tetiana has more than 10 years of experience in Peacebuilding, Sociology of Religion, Conflict studies, Conflict management, Restorative practices and dialogues in cooperation with international (USIP, OSCE, UNDP, USAID, MCC, DRC and others) and many national organizations. Educated as peacebuilder at Mirovna Academia (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hercegovina). She is combining work in the field of analysis and academic research as well as field work as dialogue facilitator and trainer in the frames of adult education.