



## STATE OF AFFAIRS

# The Communion Spoon as Icon

Vassa Larin

One of the “icons” of the Byzantine Divine Liturgy that is receiving a lot of press in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic is the communion spoon. In what follows I will first explore what is meant by “icon” in Byzantine theology, why it is that the sacramental life of the Church *operates* through sacred images or symbols, and why it is important for the faithful who participate in Byzantine Liturgy to know its symbolic language. Further I will discuss the communion spoon specifically, how and why it came to be seen as one of the sacred symbols within the *Symbolgestalt* or symbolic structure of the Byzantine Divine Liturgy, and why its symbolic place in that structure is important. The discussions and publications that I have read online concerning the communion spoon, and many writers who profess a concern for “Tradition,” seem either to ignore the symbolic aspect of the spoon, or be misinformed about it. This is unhelpful to the subject at hand, because symbolism is so

integral to Byzantine Liturgy. Finally, I will draw some practical conclusions for the topical issue facing the Church today of what is to be done—or not to be done—with the communion spoon in the Covid-19 era.

### What Is an Icon?

The term “icon” (εἰκών in Greek), meaning, in general terms, *likeness*, *image*, or *picture*, refers in Scriptural and patristic writings to a vast array of things, events, concepts, and persons, beginning with Christ himself, the “icon of the invisible God” (εἰκών τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀοράτου) (Col. 1:15).<sup>1</sup> It is through the visible, incarnate Lord that the eyes of faith are given to see the “mystery” of the invisible God. “A mystery is not when we believe what we see,” writes Saint John Chrysostom (+407), “but when we see one thing and believe about it something else.”<sup>2</sup>

It is on the basis of the incarnation, of Christ (re-)uniting in himself the hu-

<sup>1</sup> *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, ed. G. W. H. Lampe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 410.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Homilies on First Corinthians* 7.2, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 12, ed. Philip Schaff (New York: Christian Literature Co., 1889), 34. See S. Muksuris, “Liturgical Mystagogy and Its Application in the Byzantine Prothesis Rite,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 49.3–4 (2004): 292.

man and the divine, the visible and invisible, the physical and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, that the visible, sacramental celebrations of the Church indeed *re-present* to us in physical time and space the heavenly, timeless reality, or make present to us the invisible God and his truth, and draw us into being present to him, again and again.

Hence, it is through the visible icons or *symbols* of different kinds, in our liturgical life both within and beyond the walls of church buildings, that the hidden mysteries of God are revealed to us, and that we enter into union or comm-union with him, by the continuous outpouring onto the Church of the grace of the Holy Spirit. A visible “symbol,” coming from the Greek verb *sym-ballo*, meaning *to bring together*, serves to bring us together with the invisible reality. And our sacramental life, as Church, cannot work any other way than through symbols, because the human being, limited to time and space in this world, needs material likenesses and images to lead him to contemplation.<sup>3</sup> In both East and West, Christian Liturgy works through symbols. As then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote in his wonderful little book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*: “We need mediation. As yet we do not see the Lord ‘as he is.’ . . . The theology of the liturgy is in a special way ‘symbolic theology,’ a theology of symbols, which connects us to what is present but hidden.”<sup>4</sup>

### Understanding “Icons” through Mystery and History

It is important to note, however, that the symbolic theology of the Byzantine liturgy, as distinct from the Roman Rite of today, is not easily comprehensible to the uneducated faithful, nor does it aim to be. The reformed,

post-Vatican II Roman liturgy aims to be easily comprehensible, as outlined by the Liturgy Constitution of the Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: “The rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity; they should be short, clear, and unencumbered by useless repetitions; they should be within the people’s powers of comprehension, and normally should not require much explanation.”<sup>5</sup> The Byzantine Rite, on the other hand, presumes its faithful to have been catechized in what is called “mystagogy,” (μυσταγωγία, meaning *an initiation into the mysteries*) or the “mystagogical” interpretation of the liturgical rites. It was through being instructed in the symbolic or *allegorical* meanings of the liturgical space, actions, celebrants, vestments, vessels, texts, and so on, that one traditionally learned the symbolic language of Byzantine liturgy and was thus *ed into*, or *initiated into*, the mystery, that is to say, *mystagogized*.

Aside from mystagogical instruction, understanding the Byzantine liturgy today also requires a knowledge of its historical development, as has been pointed out most recently by Father Michael Zheltov.<sup>6</sup> Because of the many changes and influences that shaped the Byzantine liturgy since the era of the classic mystagogical commentators, from various epochs and regions of the Byzantine Empire and beyond its borders, it is often necessary to go back to the liturgical sources in the manuscript tradition to establish the original meaning and purpose of a given liturgical element. This historical research is also vital because of the very language of “mystery” that characterized the fathers’ approach to sacramentology. They often limited their explanations of the sacraments to allegory, avoiding dogmatic formulations of their meaning. So when questions arise about the dogmatic sense of our

<sup>3</sup> For more on “symbol,” see H.-J. Schultz, “Kultsymbolik der Byzantinischen Kirche,” in *Symbolik des Orthodoxen und orientalischen Christentums*, ed. F. Hermann (*Symbolik der Religionen* 10) (Stuttgart, 1962), 4–6; and R. Bornert, “Die Symbolgestalt der Byzantinischen Liturgie,” *Archiv für Liturgiewissenschaft* 12 (1970): 54–68.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 60.

<sup>5</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, promulgated December 4, 1963, §34, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

<sup>6</sup> M. Zheltov, “Историко-литургические аспекты сакраментологии,” in *Православное учение о церковных таинствах, V Международная богословская конференция Русской Православной Церкви, Москва 13-16 ноября 2007 г.* (Moscow, 2009), 124–5.

rites and sacraments, and patristic commentaries lack sufficient answers, historical liturgiology can provide an important service for the Church, by studying the sources of the rites themselves to deepen our understanding of their dogmatic sense.

In our present-day Church, in light of the practical absence of the mystagogical catechization of the faithful, and the dearth of education in historical liturgiology among the people and the clergy alike, there is a disconnect between us and the liturgy. By and large, we do not speak its language. Instead, each of us has our own language, our own various understandings of the visible symbols of the celebration. And thus today we find ourselves divided about that which we thought united us above all, the Eucharist, and we are being scattered, like those whose language was confused at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9).

### The Communion Spoon in History

But let us get to the communion spoon specifically, the hot topic we have all

been waiting for. Let me first briefly review its history, summarizing the exhaustive research done on the topic by my mentor, Father Robert F. Taft, and then address its symbolism.<sup>7</sup>

Originally, both in East and West, laypeople received the sacred species, the body and blood of Christ, separately. First, they received the consecrated holy bread in the right hand, having approached the minister of the bread, a priest or bishop. The communicant would then kiss the holy bread and consume it. Then he or she would approach the minister of the chalice, originally a deacon, and drink from it. It was only in exceptional cases, such as when communicating infants or the sick, that communion via “intinction” was sometimes practiced, that is, dipping the holy bread into the blood of Christ. The customary practice of lay communion in Byzantium throughout the first millenium was into the hand and under separate species, although by the ninth century there are signs that the ancient tradition was being changed in some areas. Note the additional detail that in late seventh-cen-

© 2020 The Wheel.  
May be distributed for  
noncommercial use.  
www.wheeljournal.com

<sup>7</sup> Robert F. Taft, *The Communion, Thanksgiving, and Concluding Rites*, vol. 6 of *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Rome: Pontificio istituto orientale, 2008), 204–315.

*Fractio Panis* fresco, one of the earliest depictions of a Christian eucharistic meal. Capella Greca, Catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, 3rd century.





ture Byzantium, the communicant, when receiving the body of Christ, would place the right hand on the left, palms up and folded cross-wise (as we do when receiving the priest's blessing), and thus would receive the holy bread in the right hand, as described in Canon 101 of Trullo (AD 690/1).

We know from separate witnesses that by the eleventh century, it was common, though not universal, for the faithful in Byzantium to be given communion via the liturgical spoon. And we learn from the mid-twelfth century commentary on the aforementioned 101st Canon of Trullo by Alexios Aristenos, oikonomos and nomophylax of the Great Church at Constantinople, that lay communion under separate species was no longer the custom there. Aristenos indicates that holy communion was given to the faithful directly into the mouth, and he reinterprets the crossing of the hands to mean the folding of the arms upon one's chest, as we do today when approaching communion. Nonetheless, other twelfth-century commentators on this canon, Theodor Balsamon and Joannes Zonaras, reveal that still in the late twelfth century, communion in some areas was still given to the faithful into the hand, and in two separate species.<sup>8</sup>

But why was the innovation of the communion spoon introduced, when clearly the Lord gave the bread and wine to his disciples separately? There is no official decision of a church council announcing or explaining this change of the ancient tradition, which happened very gradually, from roughly the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. Taft concluded that the reason for it was a pastoral concern about possible abuses and irreverence on the part of the laity.<sup>9</sup> Some of the laity would take the body of Christ but

not consume it, which led to "many abuses," according to Bishop Nikodim Milasch.<sup>10</sup> The fourteenth-century Byzantine commentator Saint Symeon of Thessaloniki writes diplomatically that "the fathers thought that communion should be given to the laity by a spoon because of some incidents (διὰ τινὰ ἐπιγεγονότα)."<sup>11</sup>

### The Communion Spoon as Icon

Next, let us look at the symbolism of the communion spoon. How is it an icon or symbol, what does it symbolize, and is that important for our church life today?

It is in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, when the spoon became customary in the Byzantine liturgical realm, that it was first mentioned in mystagogical commentaries. In the twelfth-century *Commentarius liturgicus* 5 of Pseudo-Sophronius of Jerusalem, and in *De sacra liturgia*, attributed to Patriarch John IV the Faster (582–95) but written no early than the fourteenth century, the communion spoon is said to symbolize the tongs with which the seraph placed the burning coal into the mouth of Isaiah.<sup>12</sup> The theme of Isaiah's "heavenly coal" had already appeared much earlier in Byzantine liturgical commentaries, but not in reference to a spoon.<sup>13</sup> Here is the vision described at the beginning of chapter 6 in the Book of Isaiah:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another

<sup>8</sup> *Правила Святых Вселенских Соборов с толкованиями. Издание Московского Общества любителей духовного просвещения* (Moscow, 1877), 610–3.

<sup>9</sup> Taft, *Communion, Thanksgiving*, 312.

<sup>10</sup> Bishop Nikodim Milasch, *Правила Православной Церкви с толкованиями Никодима, епископа Далматинско-Истрийского*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1911), 547.

<sup>11</sup> Symeon of Thessaloniki, "On the Sacred Liturgy," in *The Liturgical Commentaries*, ed. and trans. Steven Hawkes-Teeples (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Taft, *Communion, Thanksgiving*, 296.

<sup>13</sup> The theme of the coal from heaven is found c. 392–428 in Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Hom.* 16, 36–8, and in the Urtext of Germanus (ca. 730), in reference to the priest's hand, as he holds the body of Christ during the Liturgy.

and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am undone; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven." And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." (Isa. 6:1-8)

According to this symbolism, the priest or bishop who gives communion to the faithful via the spoon is seen in the role of the seraph, sent to Isaiah with a live coal from the altar of the Lord. He feeds the prophet the coal that cleanses him, and in effect empowers him to respond to God's call, to his vocation.

This is different from the symbolism that Saint John Chrysostom assigned to the priest's hand, when distributing the body of Christ into the hands of the faithful. Chrysostom, who lived centuries before the introduction of communion spoons into the liturgy that bears his name, assigned to the priest the role not of a seraph but of the Lord himself, at the Mystical Supper. Chrysostom urges his hearers in one of his homilies: "Believe that even now this is the meal of which he himself partook. . . . Therefore, when you see the priest



giving you communion, do not think that it is the priest who is doing it. Think instead that it is Christ's hand that is being extended to you."<sup>14</sup> Note that Chrysostom's symbolic interpretation, as compared with the "heavenly coal" symbolism attached to the liturgical spoon almost a millennium after his repose, also assigns a different symbolic role to laypeople. The golden-mouthed father sees the lay communicants as the group of Christ's closest disciples, gathered at his table, while the later symbolism of the communion spoon perceives each of us as the Prophet Isaiah, who, in a personal encounter with God, in a heavenly vision to which he alone was privy, was empowered to follow his prophetic

A seraph uses a pair of tongs to touch Isaiah's mouth with a burning coal. Fresco from the church of Santa Maria d'Àneu, Spain, late 11th-early 12th century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

<sup>14</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily 50 on Matthew*, §3, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857-86), 58.507. See Hans-Joachim Schulz, *The Byzantine Liturgy*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York, 1986), 15.

vocation. Thus, the symbolism of the spoon per se stresses the unity of a whole group receiving communion a bit less, and stresses each person's receiving the "heavenly coal" for his or her own vocation a bit more. I do not point out this change as if it is a bad thing—I love the "heavenly coal" symbolism—but it is a slight shift in the direction of individualizing communion, or receiving as the solitary Prophet Isaiah did the coal. It is a shift away from experiencing communion as a group, as at the common table of Christ and his disciples, as the celebrating clergy still do in the altar. It thus also creates a bit more distance between clergy and laity, in that they receive holy communion differently.

I point this out because of a recent online article, entitled "More Dangerous Than Covid-19," in which the symbolic meaning of the communion spoon is interpreted quite differently, and randomly, as far as I can see.<sup>15</sup>

The author, not a liturgist, first describes the use of the liturgical spoon as "deeply dogmatic," and then proceeds to tell us what its meaning is: "There is a theological reason for one spoon: it unifies us in the same way that the common cup does and the common loaf." Aside from the odd fact that the author makes no mention of the traditional "heavenly coal" symbolism, of which she is evidently unaware, she is simply incorrect that "the" theological reason for the communion spoon is to "unify us." No source that I know of, from our tradition, speaks about the introduction of the spoon with that specific purpose in mind, in either a practical pastoral sense or a symbolic one. The practical and pastoral reason for the adoption of the spoon was to keep the laity from abusing the holy Gifts, because the laity could not be trusted with

them. The symbolic significance that was then attached to the communion spoon remains to this day that of the tongs, with which Isaiah received the heavenly coal, as can be seen not only from the historical sources mentioned above, but from today's Prayer for the Blessing of a New Spoon for the Holy Mysteries, which mentions only this "heavenly coal" symbolism.<sup>16</sup> And the practical result of the adoption of the use of the spoon and its symbolism is a bit of an increase in the distance between clergy and laity, in their now-distinct ways of receiving holy communion, with the clergy receiving as did the Apostles at the Lord's table and the laity receiving otherwise. The explanation of the communion spoon's purpose given by the author of "More Dangerous Than Covid-19" is her own, and has no basis in the phronema.

### What's the Point of the Symbolism of the Spoon?

Let us get to a more pertinent question: What is the *point* of understanding our reception of holy communion symbolically or allegorically, whether we remember our Lord Jesus Christ giving it to his disciples at the Mystical Supper or whether we remember Isaiah's vision of the seraph giving him the burning coal? To answer this question, let us note first that there are different kinds of symbols or icons, as understood in the Church's theology and sacramental life and as described by Saint John of Damascus in his Third Treatise on Divine Images. The Damascene also distinguishes the various ways or *levels*, if you will, of veneration or respect paid to the different kinds of images in the life of the Church.

The symbolism of the communion spoon, which attaches to it the re-

<sup>15</sup> Eugenia Constantinou, "More Dangerous than Covid-19," *Orthodoxia Info*, May 30, 2020, <https://orthodoxia.info/news/more-dangerous-than-covid-19/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Молитва, еже благословити новую лжицу к Божественным тайнам" (Prayer for the Blessing of a New Spoon for the Holy Mysteries), [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Pravoslavnoe\\_Bogosluzhenie/trebnik-grazhdanskim-shriftom/67](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Pravoslavnoe_Bogosluzhenie/trebnik-grazhdanskim-shriftom/67).

<sup>17</sup> John of Damascus, *On Holy Images*, trans. Mary H. Allies (London: Thomas Baker, 1898), §3.3, 97.



membrance of a past event, the vision of Isaiah, belongs to Saint John of Damascus's sixth category of images:

The sixth kind of image is for a remembrance of past events, of a miracle or a good deed, for the honour and glory and abiding memory of the most virtuous, or for the shame and terror of the wicked, for the benefit of succeeding generations who contemplate it, so that we may shun evil and do good.<sup>17</sup>

We can see that the point of remembering the past event, of Isaiah's receiving the burning coal, when we look upon the communion spoon as an image of the tongs held by the seraph, is "for our benefit": We are to imitate the good done by Isaiah, of receiving God's "heavenly coal" that is the body and blood of his Son, and proceed to follow his call to us, to follow our vocation, saying with Isaiah: "Here I am! Take me!"

The other lesson we can glean is how we are to "respect" the sacred or dedicated vessel that is this spoon:

The third kind of worship is directed to objects dedicated to God, as, for instance, the holy Gospels and other sacred books. They were written for our instruction who live in these latter days. Sacred vessels, again, chalices, thuribles, candelabra, and altars (τράπεζαι) belong to this category. It is evident that respect is due to them all. Consider how Baltassar made the people use the sacred vessels, and how God took away his kingdom from him.<sup>18</sup>

We learn here that we are not to use "sacred vessels" for non-sacred pur-

poses, as did the Babylonian King Baltassar, the grandson of Nabuchodonosor (Nebuchadnezzar). He ordered the silver and golden cups, which were taken by his grandfather from the temple of Jerusalem, to be brought to the great banquet he was hosting for the nobles in his kingdom, so that he and "his nobles, and his mistresses, and his concubines, could drink from them" (Dan. 5:2, LXX). Baltassar was severely punished for this.

\*\*\*

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on what all this can mean for our present-day conundrum, of what to do or not to do with the communion spoon in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Here are my suggestions, which are no more or less than my opinion, on the basis of all of the above. First, *we should admit we have a problem and be flexible enough to resolve it*. Just as the ancient method of the distribution of holy communion became a "problem" for practical reasons in earlier periods of church history—and thus it was changed, despite the fact that the ancient method was the way the Lord himself distributed it and commanded to "do this" in remembrance of him—so has it become a "problem" in the modern day. Rather than pretending that the practice of using one common communion spoon is a problem only for those of little faith—and leaving aside the mutual shaming and accusations from both sides of the issue inside the Church as to whether or not the sacred species can pass on the coronavirus—we should recognize that many of our hierarchs face a problem, in any event, because of virus-related restrictions instituted by civil authorities in various countries worldwide.<sup>19</sup> The authorities have simply forbidden the customary use of the common spoon

© 2020 The Wheel.  
May be distributed for  
noncommercial use.  
[www.wheeljournal.com](http://www.wheeljournal.com)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., §3.4, 110.

<sup>19</sup> See the online petition "Faith over Fear: The Communion Spoon," <https://www.change.org/p/orthodox-christians-faith-over-fear-the-common-spoon>.

<sup>20</sup> For the present-day modifications to the rite of lay communion in the Austrian Metropolis of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, see <https://www.metropolisvonaustria.at/index.php/de/>. For the regulations of the ROCOR diocese of Berlin and Germany, see <http://sobor.de/>.

in several countries, such as Austria and Germany, which is why the local Orthodox hierarchs promptly found alternate ways of distributing communion to the faithful.<sup>20</sup> This is in line with the traditional flexibility of the Orthodox Church with regard to the way she has modified the ways she distributes her sacraments when her customary ways of doing so are either limited or impossible because of historical circumstances. For example, in the case of the sacrament of ordination, the Church has tolerated the involvement of civil authorities in the process of electing hierarchs even though Canon 30 of the Holy Apostles prohibits it. And in the case of the sacrament of holy matrimony, the church of the Byzantine Empire lived for centuries with the fact that the state, and not she, determined the regulations and decisions regarding divorce.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> John Meyendorff, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (New York, 1975), 43–4; G. Larentzakis, “Ehe, Ehescheidung und Wiederheiratung in der Orthodoxen Kirche,” *Theologisch-Praktische Quartalschrift* 125 (1977): 250–61.

<sup>22</sup> William Bassett, *The Determination of Rite* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1967), 131.

My other conclusion is that *we should retain the communion spoon, mutatis mutandis*. Why? For one thing, it is part of our liturgical language, part of the symbolic system or *Symbolgestalt* of the Byzantine rite that we inherited. And one should not easily change the symbolic language to which people of a certain tradition are accustomed. The

Roman Catholic Church knows this, which is why it traditionally placed strict canonical restrictions on changing ritual practices, mixing practices from different liturgical traditions within one and the same celebration (ritual eclecticism), or granting priests “biritual faculties”—that is, special permission to celebrate a rite other than their own.<sup>22</sup> The wisdom behind being careful when changing symbolic systems is that it is difficult for most of us to learn a new language, and to learn to recognize familiar meanings in unfamiliar symbols. It can be done, of course, but should not be done unless absolutely necessary. In the case of the liturgical spoon, to my mind it is necessary to modify, but not entirely to discontinue, its use. The modification to the communion spoon that I would suggest is one many have suggested in recent weeks: to use bamboo or wooden disposable spoons instead, which are burned afterwards. This simple solution both satisfies the hygienic concerns of governmental authorities, and preserves the symbolic language of the Byzantine Liturgy as we have it today. It also does not profane the liturgical vessels, because they would only be used at the Divine Liturgy. ✱



Sr. Dr. *Vassa Larin* is a rassophor nun and a scholar of Orthodox liturgy. She taught for seven years at the University of Vienna. She speaks regularly on issues facing the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia and sits on a number of church commissions. Since 2013, she has produced the series *Coffee with Sister Vassa*.