

Concerning Holy Communion

I am often asked by the faithful of our parish about the rules regarding Holy Communion. As Orthodox Christians, we believe that the Holy Eucharist is the very Body and Blood of Our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ. Our Lord Himself commanded us to eat of His flesh and drink of His blood (John 6:51-58). Likewise, Christ Himself instituted Holy Communion at the Last Supper in the presence of His disciples (Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-26, Luke 22:15-20). The holy apostle Paul affirms the Church's teaching in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Likewise, he warns, "whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement for himself, not discerning the Lord's body." (1 Cor. 11:27-29)

Receiving Holy Communion is necessary for our very salvation, as His Eminence, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) writes: "the union of the believer with Christ in the Eucharist is not symbolic and figurative, but genuine and integral. As Christ suffuses the bread and wine with Himself, filling them with His divine presence, so He enters into the communicant, filling our flesh and blood with His own life-giving presence and divine energy. In the Eucharist we become 'of the same body' with Christ, who enters us as He entered the womb of Mary."¹

Following Saint Paul's words, we must also be conscious that this union with God is not automatic or guaranteed. Moreover, if we receive Holy Communion unworthily, we find ourselves separated from God. So a paradox now stands before us: on the one hand we have our Savior's command to receive His Body and Blood. On the other, we have Saint Paul's warning. We also learn from Saint Paul, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

As sinners, we can never be completely worthy to receive Holy Communion. Therefore, the Orthodox Church gives her faithful children a guide to preparation. We may never be completely "worthy" but we can be prepared. Central to such preparation is confession of one's sins to a priest and sincere repentance. The very word "confess" in both Greek and Church Slavonic means "to speak out". The Apostle James writes, "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5:16) When we come to confession, we name the sins that we have committed since our last confession. We may also name the sinful passions that cause us

¹ Alfeyev, Hilarion, *The Mystery of Faith*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2002, p. 140-1.

to sin. When the priest reads the prayer of absolution over the penitent, the sins he or she has confessed are forgiven by God Himself, for it was Christ Who gave His disciples authority to “bind and loose” sins (Matthew 18:18). Confession and repentance bring great benefit to the soul, for “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23) while the grace received through a sincere confession and heartfelt repentance is life-giving. When we approach the Holy Chalice and receive the Eucharist, having confessed and repented of our sins, we enter into paradise. By partaking of Christ’s Body and Blood, we are made into the same Body and the same Blood of Christ. We come to bear Christ in us and are, as the Apostle Peter writes, “partakers of the divine nature.” (2 Peter 1:4).

The Church Fathers teach that all Orthodox Christians should receive communion as frequently as possible. This teaching bases itself in the Lord’s prayer, “give us this day our daily bread”, which the Fathers interpret to mean the Eucharist. Saint Basil the Great encouraged his flock to receive communion everyday and at a minimum four times a week: “on the Lord’s day, on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, as well as on other days when we remember one of the saints.”²

Metropolitan Hilarion further writes, “A practice of receiving Communion infrequently, for example only at great feasts or during fasts, or even just once a year, arose in Russia from a progressive weakening of eucharistic piety. Some avoided Communion out of a sense of their own unworthiness (as if by refraining from Communion they might become more worthy); while for others Communion became a mere formality, a religious duty to be observed.”³

How then do we prepare for Holy Communion? Different local Orthodox Churches have varying practices. When visiting a parish or monastery as a guest, one should follow their rule for preparation. The rule of preparation for our parish derives from the standards established by our diocese and the Orthodox Church in America.

1. To receive communion, one must be a baptized and chrismated member of a canonical Orthodox Church. Such would be a parish, monastery, or ecclesiastical institution under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, the Patriarchates Moscow⁴, Georgia, Serbia, Romania, the Orthodox Churches of Cyprus, Greece, Albania,

² Quoted in Alfeyev, *The Mystery of Faith*, p. 141.

³ *ibid.*, p. 142.

⁴ This includes the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia.

Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia, or America (OCA). Such Orthodox Christians must be in good standing with the Church and not under the ban of excommunication or under a penance to abstain from Holy Communion. Non-Christians and Christians of ecclesiastical communities outside the canonical Orthodox Church may not receive communion under any circumstance until they are received into the Orthodox Church.

2. Before receiving communion, one should have recently been to confession. In the Russian Church, it is recommended (and sometimes mandated) that one go to confession every time one is preparing for communion. This is a good practice to follow. However, **if we are frequently receiving communion, we should be going to confession at least once a month.** Of course, if we find ourselves falling into serious sins, we must go to confession before receiving communion.
3. We should have kept the appointed fasts as indicated in the church calendar and in accordance with the level of observance established with our spiritual father or father confessor. People over the age of seven, in good health, and living under ordinary circumstances should be keeping the fasts. Pregnancy, certain medical conditions (i.e. diabetes), jobs that involve heavy physical labor, and other circumstances allow for a relaxing of the rules of fasting. Again, this must be discussed with your spiritual father or father confessor.
4. We should be at peace with our immediate family members, our close neighbors, our friends, and our brothers and sisters of the parish community.
5. We should pray the Pre-Communion prayers set forth in an authorized Orthodox Prayer Book. This includes the Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion and the Prayers before Holy Communion.
6. Married couples should abstain from relations on the eve of receiving communion.
7. If the Divine Liturgy is to be served in the morning, one should fast from all food and drink (exceptions are made for conditions set forth in point 3) from midnight. If the Liturgy is to be served in the evening or at night (such as the Paschal Liturgy, a Vespereal Liturgy, or the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified Gifts), one should fast from all food and drink at least six hours before receiving communion.
8. One should attend Vespers and Matins prior to the Divine Liturgy. In the Russian tradition, Vespers and Matins are typically combined as a Vigil. In the Greek tradition, Vespers is usually served in the evening and Matins is served in the morning, prior to the Divine Liturgy. Given the circumstances of contemporary life, this rule is often relaxed. If we are not attending these services because we live a great distance from the parish or employment, economic, and/or family circumstances prevent this, we may still receive Holy Communion. However, if we are not attending these services simply out of laziness or because we would prefer to go out, socialize, enjoy entertainments (i.e. movies, concerts, dancing, sporting events, etc.) or simply stay home and relax, then we should not receive Holy Communion. If you are unable to

attend these services for legitimate reasons, you should still keep a quiet evening, avoiding entertainments, and spiritually preparing yourself for Holy Communion through reading the appointed prayers and perhaps engaging in spiritual reading.

9. One must arrive on time to the Divine Liturgy. If you are late as a result of your own negligence and/or laziness, you must not receive holy communion. If you are late for reasons beyond your control, you may receive holy communion provided you are at the Divine Liturgy during the reading of the Holy Gospel. **If you arrive to the church after the reading of the Holy Gospel, you must not receive holy communion, regardless if your tardiness is your fault or not.**
10. Women wearing lipstick must remove it before receiving holy communion.

For many, these standards may seem rigid. However, they are set forth out of love and care for people's souls. Holy Communion does not spiritually benefit us if we are not properly prepared. However, with proper preparation, with repentance from a sense of our unworthiness, and with joy, the Lord, through Holy Communion, cleanses, sanctifies and deifies us, rendering us worthy despite of our unworthiness. Not only are the bread and wine transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, but also each communicant is transformed from an old into a new person. We are freed from the burden of sin and illumined by divine light.⁵

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⁵ *ibid.*, p. 144.