

## **On the Participation of the Faithful in the Eucharist**

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The eucharist is the main Sacrament of the Church, instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ on the eve of his saving Passion, death upon the Cross, and resurrection. To participate in the eucharist and to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ is commanded by our Saviour who through his disciples said to all Christians: “Take, eat: this is My Body,” and “Drink of it, all of you: for this is My Blood of the New Testament” (Matt 26:26-28). The Church herself is the Body of Christ and, therefore, the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ visibly manifests the mystical nature of the Church, building up the ecclesial community.

The spiritual life of an Orthodox Christian is inconceivable without the communion of the Holy Mysteries. Receiving the Holy Gifts, the faithful are sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit and are united with Christ our Saviour and with each other, making one Body of Christ.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist requires special preparation. In the Church, the time itself – be it the span of a human life or the entire history of mankind – is an expectation and preparation for the encounter with Christ, while the entire rhythm of liturgical life is an expectation and preparation for the Divine Liturgy and, accordingly, for communion, for which sake the Liturgy is celebrated [in the first place].

I.

The practice of communion and the preparation for communion has changed and taken different forms throughout the history of the Church.

Already in the apostolic period, the tradition was established in the Church to celebrate the eucharist every Sunday (and, if possible, even more often, e.g. on the days of martyrs’ commemorations), so that Christians might remain in unending communion with Christ and with each other (see, e.g. 1 Cor 10:16–17; Acts 2:46; Acts 20:7). All members of the local community took part in the weekly eucharist and received communion, while the refusal to take part in the eucharistic communion without solid grounds was subject to condemnation:

All the faithful who come in and hear the Scriptures, but do not stay for the prayers and the Holy Communion, are to be excommunicated, as causing disorder in the Church (Apostolic canon 9).

The early Christian practice of communion at every Divine Liturgy remains an ideal even for the present time, as part of the Tradition of the Church.

At the same time, the growth in membership of the Church in the third and especially the fourth centuries led to some changes that entailed changes in liturgical life. As the number of the martyrs’ commemorations and feast days increased, eucharistic liturgies began to be celebrated more frequently – however, the presence at these assemblies for every Christian was considered to be merely desirable, but not mandatory. The Church has countered this tendency with the following canonical regulation:

All who enter the church of God and hear the Holy Scriptures, but do not communicate with the people in prayers, or who turn away, by reason of some disorder, from the holy partaking of the Eucharist, are to be cast out of the Church, until, after they shall have made confession, and having brought forth the fruits of penance, and made earnest entreaty, they shall have obtained forgiveness (canon 2, Council of Antioch).

Nevertheless, the sublime ideal of constant readiness for the reception of Holy Mysteries became hard to attain for many Christians. For this reason, already in the writings of the Holy Fathers of the fourth century we find evidence for the co-existence of different customs with regard to the regularity of communion. Thus, St Basil the Great refers to the communion four times a week as normative:

And to receive communion every day and to partake of the holy Body and Blood of Christ is good and beneficial, for [Christ] himself clearly says: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood, has eternal life.' ... We receive communion four times every week: on Sunday, on Wednesday, on Friday, and on Saturday, and on other days, if there happens to be a memorial of a Saint (*Letter* 93 [89]).

But less than half a century later, St John Chrysostom remarks that some, including monastics, started receiving communion only once or twice a year:

Many partake of this sacrifice once in the whole year, others twice; others many times. Our word then is to all; not to those only who are here, but to those also who are settled in the desert. For they partake once in the year, and often indeed at intervals of two years. What then? Which shall we approve? Those [who receive] once [in the year]? Those who [receive] many times? Those who [receive] few times? Neither those [who receive] once, nor those [who receive] often, nor those [who receive] seldom, but those [who come] with a pure conscience, from a pure heart, with an irreproachable life. Let such draw near continually; but those who are not such, not even once (*Homilies on the Hebrews* 17.7).

In the fourth century, the rule concerning the mandatory eucharistic fast, which emerged already in the pre-Nicene period, was definitively established, mandating a complete abstinence from food and drink on the day of communion until the reception of Christ's Holy Mysteries: "May the holy sacrament of the altar be celebrated by the people who have not eaten" (canon 41/50 of the Council of Carthage, reaffirmed by canon 29 of the Council in Trullo). However, already in the late fourth – the beginning of the fifth century some Christians started to associate communion not only with the observance of eucharistic abstinence before the Liturgy, but with the time of Great Lent in general, as attested by St John Chrysostom. The saintly bishop himself, however, was urging his flock for a more frequent communion:

Tell me, I beseech you, when after a year you partake of the Communion, do you think that the Forty Days are sufficient for you for the purifying of the sins of all that time? And again, when a week has passed, do you give yourself up to the former

things? Tell me now, if when you have been well for forty days after a long illness, you should again give yourself up to the food which caused the sickness, have you not lost your former labor too? For if natural things are changed, much more those which depend on choice. ... You assign forty days for the health of the soul, or perhaps not even forty, and do you expect to propitiate God? ... These things I say, not as forbidding you to approach once a year, but as wishing you to draw near continually (*Homilies on Hebrews* 17.7).

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Byzantium, among monastics, the tradition was established to receive communion only when it was preceded by a discipline of preparation that included fasting, the examination of one's conscience before the spiritual father of the monastery, and the reading before communion of a special prayer rule which emerged and began to develop in that period. Pious laypeople began to take their direction from this same tradition, because monastic spirituality in Orthodoxy was always perceived as an ideal. In its strictest form this tradition is represented, e.g., in the directives of the Russian Typicon (chapter 32) which, in contrast with the Greek Typicon, mentions a mandatory seven-days fast before communion.

In 1699 an article titled "Note of Instruction" (*Uchitel'noe izvestie*) was included as an appendix to the Russian Sluzhebnyk (Euchologion). This article contains, among other things, a directive concerning a mandatory term of preparation for holy communion: whoever desires, may partake during the four long fasting periods, while outside of these fasts, one must fast for seven days – this period, however, can be reduced:

If they desire to approach the holy communion outside of the four usual fasts, let them fast for seven days beforehand, remaining constant in prayers at church and at home – this is for those who are not in need, when in need, let them fast only for three days or for one day.

In practice, an extremely stringent approach toward preparation for holy communion, which had its positive spiritual aspects, led also to the fact that some Christians were abstaining from communion for a long time, citing their need for worthy preparation. The norm, contained in the Spiritual Regulation (1721), mandating that all Christians in the Russian Empire must receive communion at least once a year, was precisely directed against this practice of rare communion:

Every Christian must receive the Holy Eucharist frequently, but at least once a year. For this is our most eloquent thanksgiving to God for such salvation accomplished for us by the death of the Saviour... For this reason, if any Christian is shown to abstain long from holy communion, by this he shows himself to be not in the Body of Christ, that is, he is not a communicant of the Church.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries pious people sought to receive communion at least during every one of the lengthy fasting periods. Many saints of that time, among them St Theophan the Recluse and Righteous John of Kronstadt, called the people to approach the Holy Mysteries even more frequently. As St Theophan said, "a measure [to commune] once or twice a month – is the most measured," even though "one

can say nothing disapproving” regarding a more frequent communion. Every faithful may be guided by these words of this Saint:

Try to receive communion of the Holy Mysteries more frequently, as your spiritual father will permit. But try always to approach with due preparation and, moreover, with fear and trembling, lest, by getting accustomed, you start approaching with indifference.

The confessing struggle of the Church during the years of persecution in the twentieth century motivated many clergymen and laity to revisit the practice of infrequent communion that existed previously. In particular, on May 13, 1931 the Provisional Patriarchal Synod stated in its resolution:

[Be it resolved that] the desire that an Orthodox Christian receives communion as often as possible, and those more advanced among them – even every Sunday, may be deemed acceptable.

At the present time, many Orthodox Christians receive communion much more frequently than the majority of Christians in pre-revolutionary Russia. However, the practice of frequent communion cannot be automatically expanded unto all the faithful without exception, for the frequency of communion is directly dependent upon a person’s spiritual and moral state, so that the faithful, to use Chrysostom’s words, may approach the communion of the Holy Mysteries “with a pure conscience, as much as it is possible for us” (*Against the Jews* 3.4).

## II.

The requirements for preparation before holy communion are determined for each member of the faithful by the definitions and regulations of the Church, which are applied by each spiritual father, taking into consideration the frequency with which the person receives the Holy Mysteries, his spiritual, moral, and physical state, the external circumstances of his life, such as his occupation or whether he is overburdened by taking care for those close to him.

A person’s spiritual father is a priest, to whom a Christian regularly confesses, who is familiar with the circumstances of his life and his spiritual state. The faithful may go to confession to other priests if it is impossible for them to confess to their own spiritual father. If a faithful Christian does not have a spiritual father, he should address the questions relating to the reception of communion to the priests of the church where he desires to receive.

Both the spiritual father – who is guided by ecclesiastical definitions and regulations and, based on them, gives direction to a Christian – and the communicant as well need to understand that the goal of preparation does not lie in an external fulfillment of formal prerequisites, but in the acquisition of a penitent state of soul, the forgiveness of offenses, reconciliation with one’s neighbours, and, finally, attaining union with Christ in the Holy Mysteries. Fasting and prayer are means to assist the person preparing for communion to acquire this inner state.

Remembering the words of our Saviour, who denounced those who impose upon the people heavy burdens hard to bear (see Matt 23:4), spiritual fathers need to understand that unjustified strictness, as well as excessive leniency, can impede a person's union with our Saviour Christ and can harm him spiritually. The preparation of monastics for their participation in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is performed in accordance with the Statute on Monasteries and Monasticism, as well as following the statutes of specific monasteries.

1. The practice of fasting in preparation for communion is regulated by the ascetical tradition of the Church. The fasting as abstinence from animal products and abstaining from distractions, accompanied by assiduous prayer and repentance, traditionally precedes the communion of the Holy Mysteries. The length and extent of fasting before holy communion can differ, depending on the Christian's inner state and objective life circumstances. Particularly, in the case of an acute or chronic illness that requires special dietary rules, as well as during pregnancy and nursing a child for women, the time of fasting can be shortened, lightened, or set aside altogether. The same rule concerns Christians who temporarily or permanently live in secular institutions which presuppose living and taking meals in common (military units, hospitals, boarding schools, special schools, or prisons).

The practice that has taken shape in our time that every one who receives communion several times a year fasts for three days before communion fully corresponds to the tradition of the Church. At the same time, the practice when a person who receives communion on a weekly basis or several times a month, while observing lengthy and one-day fasts established by the Typicon, approaches the holy Chalice without any additional fasting or keeping a fast on the day or in the evening before communion, is acceptable as well. This matter has to be resolved with the blessing of the person's spiritual father. The requirements concerning preparation for holy communion, intended for the laypeople who receive communion frequently, are also applicable for members of the clergy.

Bright Week, the week following the feast of Christ's Pascha, creates a special case regarding the practice of preparation for holy communion. The ancient canonical norm regarding the obligatory participation of all faithful at the Sunday eucharist was in the seventh century expanded to include all of the Divine Liturgies during Bright Week:

From the holy day of the Resurrection of Christ our God until the New Sunday, for a whole week, in the holy churches the faithful ought to be free from labour, rejoicing in Christ with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs; and celebrating the feast, and applying their minds to the reading of the holy Scriptures, and delighting in the Holy Mysteries; for thus shall we be exalted with Christ and together with him be raised up (canon 66 of the Council in Trullo).

It follows from this canon that the laypeople are called to receive communion during the liturgies of Bright Week. Considering that the Typicon does not foresee any fasting during Bright Week and that Bright Week is preceded by seven weeks of

struggle in the course of Lent and Holy Week, it ought to be acknowledged that the practice that has been established in many parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church that Christians who observed the Great Fast receive holy communion during Bright Week, while limiting their fasting to abstaining from food after midnight, is fully consistent with the canonical tradition of the Church. Similar practice can be expanded to the period between Nativity and Theophany. Those who prepare for communion during these days should take special care from excessive consumption of food and drink.

2. One should distinguish the preparatory fast from the eucharistic fast in a proper sense, i.e. the complete abstinence from food and drink from midnight until holy communion. This fast is mandated by the canons (see canon 41/50 of Carthage, cited above). At the same time, the requirement of eucharistic fast is not applied to infants, as well as to persons who suffer from grave acute or chronic illnesses which demand a regular intake of medicine or food (e.g. diabetes), and to those who are dying. Moreover, at the discretion of the spiritual father, this requirement may be facilitated for women who are pregnant or nursing a child.

Canon law prescribes abstinence from marital relations during the period of preparation for holy communion. Canon 5 of Timothy of Alexandria refers to such abstinence on the eve of communion.

The Church encourages those Christians who suffer from the harmful habit of smoking tobacco to abandon this habit. Those, however, who do not yet have the strength to do so must abstain from smoking from midnight and, if possible, from the evening before communion.

Since in accordance with the Typicon, the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is combined with Vespers, its celebration during the evening hours constitutes a liturgical norm (even though in practice this liturgy usually is celebrated in the morning). In accordance with the decision of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church of November 28, 1968,

when the Divine Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts is celebrated in the evening, the abstention from food and drink for those who receive communion must be no less than six hours, however the abstention before communion from midnight of the day is quite praiseworthy and those who have physical strength may keep it.

One should also apply the standard of no less than six hours of abstinence while preparing for communion at the Divine Liturgy that is celebrated during the night (e.g. on the feasts of Holy Pascha and the Nativity of Christ).

3. The preparation for communion consists not only in abstinence from certain food, but also includes the more regular attendance of church services, and in the performance of a rule of prayer.

The Order of preparation for Holy Communion, consisting of a special canon and prayers, is an inalienable part of this prayerful preparation. The prayer rule usually also includes the canons to the Saviour, the Theotokos, the Guardian Angel

and other prayers (see “The Rule for those who are preparing to serve and wish to partake of the Holy Divine Mysteries of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” in the Liturgical Psalter [*Sledovannaya Psaltir*]). During Bright Week, the prayer rule consists of the Paschal canon, and also the canon and prayers before communion. A personal rule of prayer should be recited outside of services, which always presuppose the joint prayer of the entire assembly. Special pastoral care should be given to the people whose spiritual path in the Church is just beginning, and who are not yet accustomed to lengthy prayer rules, as well as to children and those who are ill. The Liturgical Psalter presupposes a possibility to replace canons and akathists with the Jesus prayer and prostrations. In the spirit of this direction, with a blessing of the spiritual father, the above-mentioned rule of prayer may be substituted by other prayers.

Since the Liturgy is the summit of the whole liturgical cycle, the attendance at the services that precede the Liturgy – primarily, Vespers and Matins (or the Vigil) – is an important part of preparation for the partaking of the Holy Body and Blood of Christ.

If a person was absent at the evening services on the eve of communion or did not recite his prayer rule in its fullness, his spiritual father or a priest who hears his confession must urge him to a more thorough preparation for communion, but also must take into account the circumstances of his life and possible existence of excusable reasons.

Preparing themselves for the reception of the Holy Mysteries of Christ at the Divine Liturgy, the children of the Church must gather in the temple before the service begins. To come late for the Divine Liturgy, especially when the faithful arrive after the reading of the Epistle and the Gospel demonstrates neglect toward the Mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ. If such tardiness occurs, the priest who hears confessions or distributes communion may decide not to admit such a person to the Holy Chalice. Exception can be made for people with limited physical capabilities, nursing mothers, small children, and the adults who accompany them.

After the end of the Divine Liturgy, a Christian must hear in church or himself read the thanksgiving prayers after holy communion. While prayerfully giving thanks to God for the gift he has received, a Christian must strive by all means to preserve this gift in peace, piety, and love for God and neighbour.

Considering the unbreakable bond between communion and the Divine Liturgy, the clergy must not permit the practice where in some churches the faithful are prohibited from receiving holy communion on the feasts of Holy Pascha, the Nativity of Christ, Theophany, on Memorial Saturdays, and on the Day of Rejoicing (*Radonitsa*).

### III.

A person who is preparing for holy communion performs an examination of his conscience, which presupposes a sincere repentance for the sins he has committed and revealing of these sins before the priest in the Sacrament of Repentance. In the situation where many who come to our churches are not yet fully rooted in the church life, and consequently sometimes do not understand the meaning of the Sacrament of the Eucharist or are not aware of the moral and canonical consequences of their sinful deeds, confession allows the

priest who hears confession to discern whether it is possible to allow the penitent to receive the Holy Mysteries of Christ.

In special cases, in accordance with the practice that has formed in many parishes, a spiritual father may allow a layperson to partake of the Body and Blood of Christ several times during the same week (e.g. during Holy or Bright Week) without coming to confession before every communion, excluding the situations when a person desiring to receive communion perceives a need for confession. While giving this blessing to the faithful, spiritual fathers should particularly remember their great responsibility for the souls of their flock, which was placed upon them in the sacrament of ordination.

In some parishes, it takes a long time to wait for the communion of the laity to begin. This occurs due to the length of communion of the clergy during liturgies with many concelebrants or due to the hearing of confessions after the communion verse. This state of affairs should be seen as undesirable. The sacrament of repentance must be, if possible, performed outside of Divine Liturgy, lest the penitent and the confessing priest both be deprived from full participation in the joint eucharistic prayer. It is unacceptable for a priest assisting at the liturgy to hear confessions during the reading of the Gospel or during the eucharistic canon. It is desirable to hear confessions in the evening before the Divine Liturgy or before the beginning of the liturgy. Moreover, it is important to establish in parishes the fixed days and hours when a priest would always be present [in church] to meet those who desire to talk with their pastor.

#### IV.

It is unacceptable to receive communion in a state of resentment or anger, or with grave, unconfessed sins or unforgiven offenses. Those who dare to approach the eucharistic gifts in such a state of soul place themselves under divine judgment, in accordance with the words of the Apostle: "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor 11:29-30).

When grave sins have been committed, the application of the canons regarding excommunication of a person for an extended period of time (for longer than one year) may be performed only with the blessing of the diocesan bishop. When a priest abuses his right to impose penances, his case may be brought for review by the ecclesiastical court.

The canons prohibit receiving communion in the state of female impurity (canon 2 of St Dionysius of Alexandria, canon 7 of Timothy of Alexandria). An exception may be made in case of a danger of death, and whenever the issue of blood continues for a long time due to chronic or acute illness.

#### V.

As it was stated in the Bases for Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church (10.2) and in the definition of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church of December 28, 1998, the Church, while insisting upon the necessity for ecclesiastical marriage, still does not deprive from communion of the Holy Mysteries the spouses who constitute a marital union contracted with the acceptance of all legal rights and duties and recognized as a legally valid marriage, but which was not for some reasons sanctified by the rite of crowning. This measure of ecclesial economy is grounded in the words of St Paul (1 Cor 7:14) and canon 72 of the Council in Trullo, and intends to make it more possible to live the life of the



Church for those Orthodox Christians who entered their marriage before the beginning of their conscious participation in the Church's sacraments. In contrast with adulterous cohabitation, which is a canonical impediment for communion, the former union constitutes a legal marriage in the eyes of the Church (excepting the cases when legally permissible "marriages," e.g. between close relatives or same-sex cohabitations, recognized in a number of countries, are from the Church's point of view unacceptable in principle). The duty of pastors, however, is to remind the faithful of the necessity not only to contract a legally valid marriage, but also to sanctify such marriage through the liturgical rite of the Church.

Special attention is given to cases when persons have lived together for a long time, often having children together, but are not united either through ecclesiastical or a state-recognized marriage – moreover, one of the persons in this cohabitation does not desire either to register their relationship or to marry in Church. Such cohabitations are sinful and their wide dissemination in the world demonstrates the rebellion against the divine purpose concerning man, endangers the institution of marriage and cannot receive any recognition from the Church. At the same time, the spiritual father who knows the life situation of a specific person and condescends to human weakness, may in exceptional cases admit to communion the person in this relationship who is aware of the sinfulness of such cohabitation and seeks to enter a lawful marriage. The person in this cohabitation, guilty of preventing this marriage from taking place, cannot be admitted to communion. If, however, at least one of the cohabiting persons is married to another person, both sides cannot be admitted to communion without canonical rectification of their condition and offering an appropriate penance.

## VI.

The preparation of children for holy communion has its own special characteristics. The length of this preparation is determined by the parents with the advice of their spiritual father and must take into consideration the child's age, state of health, and the extent of his integration into the life of the Church.

Parents who regularly bring their children to the Holy Chalice, which is a good thing, must seek to receive communion together with them (if it is not possible for both parents to receive, then one parent at a time). The practice where parents bring children to communion, but themselves seldom receive communion, prevents the development in a child's mind of a sense of need to partake of the eucharistic meal.

The first confession before communion, in accordance with canon 18 of Timothy of Alexandria, is performed after the child has reached ten years of age, but in the tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church the first confession usually occurs at seven years of age. At the same time, the age of the first confession, as well as the frequency of confession for a child between seven and ten years of age, if he receives communion every Sunday, must be determined by the spiritual father and the parents together, considering the individual characteristics in the child's development and his understanding of the life of the Church.

The eucharistic fast is not mandatory for children until three years of age. According to tradition, beginning with the age of three years, Orthodox families gradually teach the child to abstain from food and drink before the communion of the Holy Mysteries. By the age of seven years, a child must be firmly accustomed to receive on an empty stomach. From this time, the child should be instructed to read the prayers before holy

communion, the content and length of which is determined by the parents in accordance with the child's age, as well as his spiritual and intellectual development.

The sponsors of the child must fully participate in rearing the children in piety, which includes urging the children toward regular partaking of the Holy Mysteries of Christ and helping the parents to bring the children to the Holy Chalice.

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The eucharist is the central Sacrament of the Church. Regular communion is necessary for a human being for salvation, in accordance with the words of our Lord Jesus Christ:

Truly, truly I say unto you: unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:53-54).