

PREPARING FOR HOLY COMMUNION

First century Corinthians were a rowdy lot. Their city was a bustling port, a gathering spot for every kind of person, idea, and perversion in the Mediterranean world. St Paul spent 18 months there, evangelizing and buinding up the Church.

But people do not change overnight, and so brought many of their ingrained habits into their new faith. Paul wrote to them repeatedly to tame their excesses. One of his complaints concerned their behavior at the Eucharist. They came to eat the One Bread but fought among themselves at the Table. And so Paul instructed them:

“Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be behaving unworthily toward the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone is to recollect himself before eating this bread and drinking this cup; because a person who eats and drinks without discerning the Body is eating and drinking his own condemnation. In fact, that is why many of you are weak and ill and some of you have died”
(1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

Paul perceived that spiritual illness and death result from “not discerning the Body” in the Eucharist. What does this mean?

DISCERNING THE BODY

Discerning the Body” refers to our awareness of what the Eucharist is and what the consequences of receiving it are for our lives. The recipient is expected to know what he or she is receiving and to act accordingly. To the best of our ability we should know that:

- **The Eucharist is the mystical body and blood of Christ** which we receive “for the remission of sins and for eternal life”. This demands that we “approach with fear of God, with faith and with love” (*Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*), marvelling at the great privilege we have been given of receiving these mysteries through no merit of our own.
- **The Eucharist is given us so that “those who share the one Bread and the one Cup be united to one another in the communion of the Holy Spirit”** (*Liturgy of St Basil*). This demands that we

who presume to receive the sacrament of unity be committed to oneness of life with those around us. To do otherwise is not to discern the Body.

From the fourth or fifth centuries almost to our present day this need to discern the Body was so instilled in people that the majority of Christians stayed away from Communion except on the greatest feasts. Rather than go through what was considered appropriate preparation, they stayed away from the Lord's Table. In the last hundred years, this trend has been reversed and most people regularly approach at every Liturgy. Often, however, some give the impression that they are not “discerning the Body”, because of their behavior at the Liturgy. They talk continually throughout the service, even as they approach the mysteries, leave with the holy gifts still in their mouth, or nurse long standing grudges against others, even with those who have just shared the Eucharist with them! It is evident that, while we rejoice that more people are heeding the Lord's invitation to eat and drink, we must grieve that many are not discerning the Body.

Because “discerning the Body” demands both reverence for the holy gifts and love for one another, our Church over the centuries has developed the following practices in preparation for receiving the Eucharistic mysteries:

MUTUAL FORGIVENESS

Referred to the Jewish temple sacrifices, the highpoint of worship in His day, Jesus taught: *“If you are bringing your offering to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, go and be reconciled with your brother first, and then come back and present your offering”*(Matthew 5:23). Worship offered with a heart clouded by resentments and emotional “unfinished business” is not acceptable to God.

And so the first aspect of preparing to receive Communion is resolving any differences we might have with others. Our Church incorporated this command of Christ into the Liturgy as the holy kiss where, before the great prayer of offering (anaphora), we are enjoined to “love one another so that with one mind we may confess” what God has done for us. Many Eastern Christians also have the custom of making the

rounds of their relatives and friends and asking forgiveness of each before they receive Communion. The sense of both these practices is clear: we cannot receive the sacrament of love without love in our hearts. And if it isn't there, we must do something about it!

PRAYERS OF PREPARATION

The prayerbooks of our Church contain a wealth of prayers in preparation for receiving the Eucharist. In some churches a few of these prayers may be recited or sung in common at the Liturgy. People are also encouraged to direct their attention to the coming encounter with the Lord in this mystery by praying some of these prayers the evening and/or morning before attending the Liturgy. Some of these prayers may be found in the books commonly used in our parishes (e.g., *Publican's Prayer Book*). It is particularly important that parents read these prayers with their families before coming to church, especially when they have young children, so that the special character of the Eucharist may be impressed on them.

THE EUCHARISTIC FAST

Another way of heightening our awareness of the unique gift of divine life which is ours when we share in the Eucharist is by observing the Eucharistic fast. As we prepare for the spiritual experiences of Pascha or Christmas by redirecting our energies through fasting, so too we do the same to prepare for Christ's Eucharistic banquet. By it we are proclaiming that we are waiting to be nourished, in expectation of being filled with the fullness of the supersubstantial Bread of life.

While it is not applied legalistically as in the past, the fast retains its value for those who see it as a reminder that Christ is our nourisher and our nourishment as well. People are encouraged to fast from midnight, if possible, or at least a few hours according to their state of health. Approaching the Lord's Table on a full stomach or stopping off in the church hall for a cup of coffee before Liturgy as some do – at least indicates that we have not been waiting for the Bridegroom's coming before feasting.

APPROACHING THE HOLY TABLE

It is folly not to approach Holy Communion with great awe, purified by prayer and fasting according to our ability (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26-31). At the time of Communion, **we come forward with the right hand crossed over the left and held to the breast.** While the person in front of you is communicating, make one or two metanies. If the priest does not know you by name, mention it as you approach so that he can repeat it in the Communion formula. Then open your mouth widely and do not attempt to say anything else (amen, thank you, etc.) while the priest administers the holy mysteries to you.

In the Melkite Church Communion is generally given by intinction: the holy bread is dipped into the chalice and placed in your mouth. **The mouth must be fully open;** the tongue may be extended or not. Most Byzantine Churches administer Communion with a spoon. When receiving in this manner, the tongue should not be extended, nor should the communicant close his mouth until the spoon has been removed.

If the priest is carrying a communion cloth, wipe your lips with it after communicating, then step aside and again make a metany before going back to your place.

GIVING THANKS TO THE LORD

The final chants, litany and prayers of the Liturgy are meant to express our gratitude for the gift of life we have been given. "We have seen the true Light, we have received the heavenly Spirit..." It is the time to remember the life to which we have been called and for which we have been empowered through the Eucharist.

As with the prayers of preparation, the Church has a number of thanksgiving prayers intended to be said after Communion. In some churches a few of them may be recited while people are receiving the antidoron or afterwards. It is helpful to our striving to discern the Body if we listen attentively to these prayers or read them on our own. Again, reciting them as a family after returning home from the Liturgy is another way of helping children learn to know the great mystery they have received.

DISCOURSE OF ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ON PREPARING FOR HOLY COMMUNION

Deary beloved and most cherished brethren, who are gathered in this holy temple to adore the living God in piety and justice and partake of the holy, immortal, spotless, and awesome mysteries of Christ: hear me, humble and unworthy as I am, for it is not I who speak and teach you, but the grace of the all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit. I speak, not on my own, but as I was taught by the Holy Canons, the God-bearing Fathers, and the ways of our Holy Church as received by the holy apostles, instructed by God. I am the humblest and smallest of men: I do not know your actions nor do I know your needs, but I do know the fear of God which commands each and every one of us, both men and women, small and great: Let none of you who is guilty of sin and who is gnawed by his or her conscience dare to draw near this sacred Fire before repenting and confessing or to come in ridicule, because God is a consuming Fire.

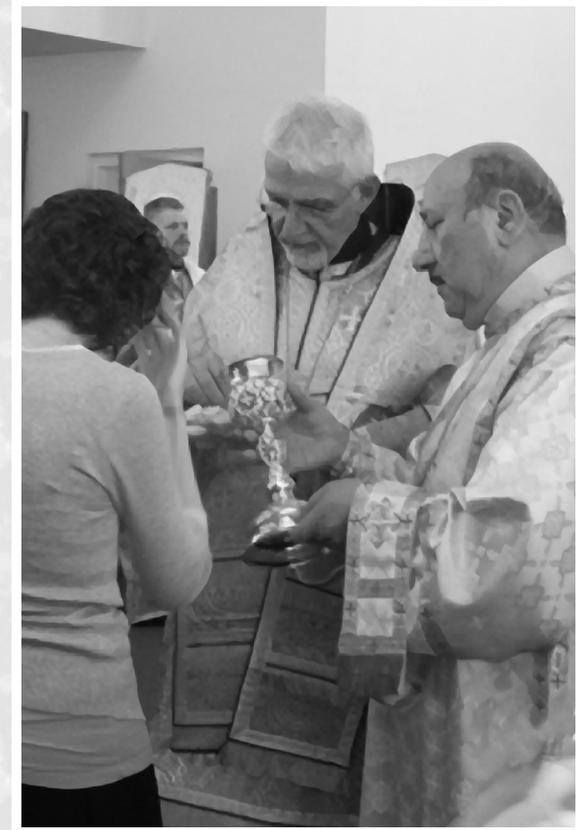
To those who draw near in faith and fear of Him who is our God and King and the Judge of all mankind, He will completely burn away your sins and will fill your souls with light and sanctification.

But to the faithless who draw near without shame, He burns and sears both soul and body. "For this reason there are many among you who are sick and, being sick, sleep"; that is, many die without having repented or been forgiven.

Therefore, my brethren, I implore you and say: let no blasphemer, perjurer or liar, no fornicator, adulterer or sodomite, no magician or fortune teller, no thief or heretic draw near to the awesome mysteries of Christ or touch them without having confessed and prepared himself, for "it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God".

"The word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword that pierces the very joints and marrow of our heart and bones." Behold, therefore, my brethren, let no one who is unrepentant, unprepared, or unworthy draw near and receive these dread Mysteries, for He says "I destroy and I give life, and you shall not escape out of my hands".

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