

Eucharistic Discipline in the Orthodox Church

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People of whatever convictions -- theistic or atheistic, Christian or non-Christian -- who behave in an orderly and respectful manner may attend liturgical services in an Orthodox church, and participate, as possible, in the prayers and rituals (such as singing psalms and hymns, and venerating icons and relics). But only members of the Orthodox Church who practice a specific spiritual discipline may participate in the Church's sacraments and receive holy communion at the Orthodox divine liturgy. The essential elements of eucharistic discipline in the Orthodox Church may be simply stated in five points.

- Participation in Holy Communion in the Orthodox Church requires first of all that a person be a baptized, chrismated member of the Orthodox Church who fully accepts the conditions and demands of his or her baptism and chrismation. Eucharistic discipline in the Orthodox Church demands that communicants in the eucharistic sacrifice understand themselves at all times and in all circumstances as having died and risen with Christ, as sealed by the Holy Spirit, and as belonging to God as His bonded-servants and free-born sons in Jesus.

- Baptism and chrismation, and so, participation in holy communion, require a person to believe in the Word of God, the Gospel of Christ, and the Christian Faith summarized in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, as these are proclaimed and interpreted in the Orthodox Church. Members of the Orthodox Church who question biblical or churchly doctrines may participate in holy communion if they are praying and working to come to an enlightened understanding of the Faith under the guidance of their pastors and teachers. But those who have been baptized and chrismated in the Orthodox Church who publicly express doubt and disbelief about the faith as confessed and lived in the Orthodox Church, or secretly harbor such doubt and disbelief, may not partake of holy communion at an Orthodox divine liturgy.

- Confessing the Christian faith as understood and practiced in the Orthodox Church is to identify fully with Orthodox Church history and tradition, and to take full responsibility for it. It is to accept and defend the dogmas and canons of the councils accepted by the Orthodox Churches, to worship according to Orthodox liturgical rites, to venerate those who are glorified as Orthodox saints, and to struggle to practice the ethical and moral teachings of Christ and his apostles as recorded in the holy scriptures and elaborated in Orthodox Church tradition. Because participation in the holy Eucharist is not only a sacred communion with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, but also a holy communion with Orthodox believers of all times and places, responsibility for the whole of Orthodox Church history and tradition is an absolute condition for partaking in the holy communion of Christ's body and blood at the Church's divine liturgy.

- Identifying fully with Orthodox Christian teaching and practice requires a communicant in the Orthodox Church to strive to put the Church's biblical, evangelical and apostolic teachings into practice in their everyday lives. No one can believe and do everything perfectly. Eucharistic discipline, however, demands that a communicant struggles to do so, admitting when he or she fails, and repenting without self-justification over one's failures and sins. This means, concretely, that eucharistic discipline requires a communicant to study God's Word in scripture, to pray and fast and give alms as one can, to attend church services as regularly as possible, and to live according to God's commandments in all aspects of one's life and work, regularly giving an account of one's behavior to one's pastor and spiritual guide, repenting of one's sins, and struggling by God's grace to change and improve. Persons rejecting such a disciplined life may not partake of Holy Communion in the Orthodox Church.

- Eucharistic discipline in the Orthodox Church finally requires that a communicant be in constant repentance, realizing that he or she is never worthy of receiving holy communion, and knowing that the heartfelt confession of one's unworthiness is an absolute condition for partaking in a worthy manner. The essential expression of one's unworthiness to receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion, with the admission of one's sins, is the forgiveness of others. Eucharistic discipline demands that communicants of Christ's body and blood be at peace with everyone as far as they can be, even when others are unwilling to forgive and be reconciled. At least within themselves, partakers of Holy Communion at an Orthodox Divine Liturgy must be in a union of love with all people, including their worst enemies.

Acceptance of one's baptism and chrismation in the Church, responsibility for the Church's faith and life, the struggle to put the faith fully into practice, accountability for one's personal belief and behavior, constant and continual repentance, and peace with all people in the union of love commanded and given by God in Christ and the Holy Spirit -- these are the requirements for participation in holy communion in the Orthodox Church. They are, ultimately and essentially, what Holy Communion itself is all about.