

Preparation for Holy Communion

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Committed Orthodox Christians order and measure their lives in this world from communion to communion.

We greet the Lord's Day each week with the eager expectation of entering into holy communion with God by the action of His Holy Spirit in the Church, through Jesus Christ, God's Son and Word, who is also the Lamb of God and the Bread of Life. Following each Lord's Day, we live in memory of the blessed experience of holy communion, and we begin immediately to anticipate this divine gift in the next divine liturgy.

Christians live from Sunday to Sunday, and, throughout the year, from Pascha to Pascha. We also live from liturgy to liturgy, from eucharist to eucharist, from communion to communion. Our lives are measured and tested by this sacred event. All that we are and do finds its beginning and end, its meaning and fulfillment, in God's gift of holy communion through Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Church.

Continual Preparation for Holy Communion

Committed Christians remember what God has done in history and anticipate what God is yet to do. We live in function of Christ's first coming as a slave to be crucified and glorified, and His final coming at the end of the ages to establish God's kingdom.

The Church's eucharistic worship unites and embraces the Lord's two comings, together with all of God's mighty acts in history. It makes them present for our participation, here and now, for the forgiveness of sins, for the healing of soul and body, and for life everlasting.

Every moment of a Christian's life is a preparation for the encounter with God which is sacramentally realized in holy communion. Every moment we are making ready to enter God's kingdom which is coming with observation and power at the end of the ages. We live every moment in constant awareness of the Lord's presence in our lives here and now, preparing us in hope for unending communion with Him in the age to come.

In this perspective, everything that we Christians think, say and do in every moment of our lives is a preparation for holy communion -- in this life in the holy eucharist, and without end in the age to come at the end of the world.

General Preparation for Holy Communion

Because we Christians living in this world are inevitably caught up in earthly activities, afflictions, trials and temptations, and because we are so easily overcome by sinful passions, God gives us ways by which we are enabled never to forget Him. He provides practices by which we can keep ourselves constantly prepared to meet Him at His coming. He offers rules of spiritual and physical discipline for us to practice so that we can remain constantly alive to His presence and power in our lives and so to be ready to receive Him when He gives Himself to us in holy communion.

The general disciplines for preparing for holy communion are the disciplines of Christian life itself. They are the practices which keep us alive to God, the actions which open our minds, hearts and bodies to the presence of God's grace and power in our lives. They basically include:

- regular participation in the Church's liturgical worship
- regular practice of a rule of personal prayer
- regular practice of a rule of ceaseless mental prayer, or "prayer of the heart," to insure our constant remembrance of God
- regular practice of periods of silence
- regular practice of fasting and abstinence
- regular reading of the Bible and spiritual writings
- regular confession of sins (and thoughts, feelings, temptations and dreams) to our pastor, or to someone whom our pastor authorizes and blesses for this purpose
- regular giving and receiving of forgiveness of sins with all the people in our lives
- regular donations of money to the Church, and to those in need
- regular sharing of our time, energies, and possessions with others
- constant effort to do our daily work as well as we can, to God's glory, for the good of people, and
- constant striving not to sin in the smallest way in the routine activities of our everyday life and personal relationships.

The words regular and constant are repeated and emphasized because our spiritual practices and activities must be done according to a rule (regula, kanona, pravilo). They must be done constantly and consistently with conscious attention and discipline. They cannot be left to whim, caprice or feeling.

What a person does in regard to liturgical worship, personal prayer, fasting, reading, contributing, working and serving

will be shaped according to the conditions of his or her life. It will be different for each person according to age, strength, health, available time, and personal capabilities. The saints say that rules of prayer, reading and fasting should be brief but frequent, simple, pure, uncomplicated and keepable. They should be determined and established with spiritual advice and counsel in ways which permit them to be easily included within the real possibilities of one's actual life.

Specific Preparation for Holy Communion

In addition to the Christian's general spiritual discipline, each believer must make specific devotional efforts in preparing for holy communion. These efforts will also differ from person to person. They will include a set number of specific prayers and readings, a specific practice of confession and reconciliation with others, and specific good deeds, such as almsgiving and financial contributions. They will depend on the conditions of one's life.

A monastic person or clergyman, for example, will normally have a longer rule of specific preparation for holy communion than a lay person. A person with fewer duties will also be freer to spend more time and effort in concentrated preparation for eucharistic communion than someone who has more tasks to perform (for instance, a mother of small children).

People with disciplined spiritual lives who partake regularly and frequently of the sacraments will have less specific preparation for holy communion than those with undisciplined spiritual lives who seldom partake of the holy mysteries. The latter will surely have to make extraordinary efforts to read special prayers, keep special fasts, do special good deeds, give special contributions, and make special acts of sacramental confession when these practices are not a regular, constant and consistent part of their lives.

Prayers Before and After Holy Communion

The usual psalms and prayers for Orthodox Christians before and after partaking of holy communion are contained in Orthodox prayer books of various editions. Literate believers must decide with spiritual counsel how they will, as a rule, use these prayers of preparation and thanksgiving. When this decision is made, every effort must be made to keep one's rule until it must be adjusted or altered, again with spiritual counsel and advice, because of the changing conditions of one's life.

When we believers fail to keep our rules, we must find the reasons for our failures, and take appropriate action, once again with the assistance of our pastors and spiritual guides. In this way our participation in the Lord's Mystical Supper will be done in a worthy manner. It will be for the forgiveness of our sins, for the healing of our souls and bodies, and for our eternal salvation, and not for our condemnation and judgment.

May the Lord convince us of our unworthiness to partake of holy communion. May He teach us that nothing we can say or do makes us worthy of this divine gift. May He convince that only the heartfelt confession of our unworthiness to partake permits us to participate in a worthy manner. And may He empower us to obey His Word and receive His Body and Blood in godly fear, with faith and love, so that we may really see the true light, find the true faith, receive the heavenly Spirit, and worship the Undivided Trinity Who has saved us through holy communion with Himself.