

ORTHODOX PRACTICE OF HOLY COMMUNION

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We read from the Church's very beginning: "[The baptized] continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, and in the communion, the breaking of bread, and in the prayers...And the Lord added to the church (Gk., *assembly*) daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42, 47; literal translation). The Apostle exhorts the Corinthian Christians: "[W]hen you come together as a church (Gk., *assembly*)...in one place...to eat the Lord's Supper...For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me,'" etc. (1 Cor. 11:17-26).

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This bears repeating because it is absolutely essential: the very definition of "church" (Gk., *ekklesia*, meaning "assembly") is the baptized faithful gathered in one place specifically to receive Holy Communion, the very body and blood of Christ. Holy Communion takes place within the

context of the apostles' doctrine (Scripture reading with explanation) and the prayers (common liturgical service). Therefore Orthodox Christians must practice Holy Communion in order to be Christians in the Church of Christ. As is apparent from the above quotations, Orthodox practice of Holy Communion necessarily involves *reception* of Holy Communion by the faithful, not merely the performance of the Lord's Supper by the clergy, for instance, always serving the Divine Liturgy on Sundays and feast days whether or not the people actually partake of the body and blood of Christ.

Orthodox practice of Holy Communion assumes that if a person is a baptized believer, a member of the Church (1 Cor. 12:12-14; Gal. 3:26-28; Eph. 4:4-6), that person will receive Holy Communion when the Church is gathered together for this very

purpose. For an Orthodox Christian not to receive Holy Communion when gathered for the Divine Liturgy is irregular and contrary to the Faith. “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 (i.e., suspended from Communion), as causing disorder in the Church” (*Apostolic Canons*, 9; ca. 300 A.D.). “If any bishop, or presbyter (priest), or deacon, or any of those who are enumerated in the list of the clergy, or a layman, has no very grave necessity nor difficult business so as to keep him from church (i.e., the liturgical assembly) for a very long time, but being in town does not go to church on three consecutive Sundays – three weeks – if he is a cleric let him be deposed, but if a layman let him be cut off (i.e., suspended from Communion)” (*Quinisext*, canon 80; ca. 690 A.D.).

Orthodox practice of Holy Communion is not a legalistic requirement, but a manifestation of and participation in the new life in Christ. Baptized into Christ, the believer has communion with God the Holy Trinity and all the faithful in the Person of Jesus Christ who is love incarnate. The love of Christ is actualized repeatedly and often at the Lord’s Table where the former separation between God and sinners and between sinners and sinners is overcome in mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

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“[Christ] Himself is our peace...you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (Eph. 2:14, 19; 3:6). “The cup of blessing which we bless, it is not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

The concept of Christian “communion” (Gk., *koinonia*) denotes total commonality, community, and unity of purpose derived completely from God and enacted among the godly. The apostle explains with a list of like terms: “For what *fellowship* has righteousness with lawlessness? And what *communion* has light with darkness? And what *accord* has Christ with Belial (i.e., the devil)? Or what *part* has a believer with an unbeliever? And what *agreement*¹ has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

Orthodox practice of Holy Communion is simultaneously a fellowship, accord, part, and agreement with all that is of God and good, and a disassociation, renunciation, refusal, and separation from all that is not of God as shown by Jesus Christ our Lord. Thus Orthodox Christians must be baptized (including chrismation, the anointing with chrism, the seal of the Holy Spirit²) to receive Holy Communion, and only the Orthodox baptized are given Communion in Orthodox churches. Yet as baptism is truly a separation from sin, death, and the work of the devil, so also receiving Holy Communion is a confession of that new and different life in Christ and the Holy Spirit. The baptized approach Holy Communion in repentance, faith, and love, as persons who have been and want to be changed continuously for the better in Christ.

As in Baptism, so at every Holy Communion, Christians declare their absolute unity with God and one another in the faith of Jesus Christ. The Lord prayed before His arrest and crucifixion: “They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world...[T]hat they may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us,

¹ The Greek terms are *metochē* (“sharing”), *koinonia* (“communion”), *sympōnēsis* (“harmony”), *meris* (“part[icipation]”), and *synkatathesis* (“agreement”).

² Orthodox baptism includes the renunciation of Satan and the sealing with the gift of the Holy Spirit, done by anointing with Holy Chrism (see 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14; 1 Jn. 2:20, 27). While the Orthodox Church recognizes Trinitarian water baptisms done among non-Orthodox Christian groups, those so baptized are then chrismated when they convert, fulfilling their previous baptism, and subsequently receive Holy Communion in the Orthodox Church.

that the world may believe that You sent Me...that they may be one just as We are one...that they may be made perfect in one" (Jn. 17:21-23). One God in Trinity, one Savior, one Body/Church, one Baptism, one Bread, one Cup – this is the reality of the faithful called out of the world to be disciples of Christ. This reality is revealed at each Holy Communion.

Our Lord described His table, the Lord's Supper and Holy Communion, as "the new covenant in My blood" and "My kingdom" (Lk. 22:20, 28-30). The covenant is a pact, a relationship of mutual responsibility. The kingdom is a dominion, a realm of spiritual authority and blessing. The apostle Paul describes both manifested at the Divine Liturgy over which presides the High Priest, Jesus Christ.

"Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest...a Minister (Gk., *leitourgos*; "Liturgist") of the sanctuary...He has obtained a more excellent ministry (Gk., *leitourgia*; "liturgy"), inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant...a new covenant" (Heb. 8:1-13; cf. Acts 13:2). The only other place the phrase "new covenant" occurs is at the Lord's Supper on our Lord's lips: "[T]he new covenant in My blood."

"But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel...Therefore since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:22-24, 28). Thus the Orthodox Liturgy begins with these words: "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

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In addition to the unbaptized/chrismated not yet receiving Holy Communion, as referenced above it is possible for the baptized members of the Church to be suspended from receiving Holy Communion when gathered at the Divine Liturgy. Sometimes members of the Church suspend themselves from Communion by not coming to Communion when they should, by definition, be receiving the body and blood of Christ. To be baptized and chrismated, and then to gather for the Divine Liturgy but not receive Communion is a false piety, a disparate understanding of what the Church is.

Saint John Chrysostom preached against this falsehood in the late 4th century. “Oh! The force of custom and of prejudice! In vain is the daily Sacrifice, in vain do we stand before the Altar; there is no one to partake. These things I am saying, not to induce you to partake anyhow, but that ye should render yourselves worthy to partake. Art thou not worthy of the Sacrifice, nor of the participation? If so, then neither art thou of the prayer. Thou hearest the herald, standing and saying, ‘As many as are in penitence, all pray.’ As many as do not partake, are in penitence” (*Homily 4 on Ephesians*).

If persons are members of the Church, they should receive Holy Communion when they gather with the faithful specifically for that purpose at the Divine Liturgy, unless (as St. John Chrysostom observes) they are “in penitence.” *Penitence*, or being “under penance,” is a public state of suspension from Holy Communion because a person is demonstrating their genuineness of repentance for some egregious sin. By committing such an egregious sin, they have separated themselves from communion with God and the Church and need to be restored as a genuine follower of Christ.

One example is the man in the Corinthian church who was fornicating with his father’s wife. The apostle says, “[W]hen you are gathered together (i.e., at the liturgical assembly), along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (1 Cor. 5:1-5). Later in the same chapter, after listing several unchristian

sinful behaviors, he writes “[N]ot to keep company with anyone named a brother (i.e., fellow Christian)” who does such things, “not even to eat with such a person” (1 Cor. 5:9-11). In the next chapter he writes that persons practicing unrighteousness “will [not] inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed (i.e., baptized), but you were sanctified (i.e., chrismated), but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:10-11).

Baptism and Holy Communion are the means by which a person is transformed from the old man sold under sin to the new man practicing righteousness, from death to life, from darkness to the light. A Christian is a changed person; therefore, return to certain sinful practices antithetical to the Faith is cause for suspension from Holy Communion as proof of the need for repentance and reconciliation to the true Christian life. Such a measure should encourage repentance.

“This punishment (Gk., *epitimia*) which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow...For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted...What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter” (2 Cor. 2:6-7; 7:10-11).

Different degrees of sin require different spiritual treatments. Every Christian still on this earth even after Baptism is a sinner to some degree, so sinlessness is not required before receiving Holy Communion. In this sense every communicant confesses his or her sin during the Divine Liturgy with these words: “I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, who came into the world to save sinners

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of whom I am first.” Holy Communion is a necessary means of receiving forgiveness of sins, one of its primary blessings (Matt. 26:26-28).

Still other sins bring spiritual death, that is, separation from the life with God in Christ, hence a rupture of communion with God and His Church. The example of the Corinthian man above is an example, which according to the Old Testament law, was a capital crime (see Lev. 20:11; Deut. 23:1). The apostle John calls these egregious sins “sin leading to death” (1 Jn. 5:16). According to the Scripture these sins are more serious than involuntary errors also called missteps or mistakes (see Lev. 4:2; 5:15). These sins unto death (i.e., mortal sins) are rather done “with a hand of arrogance...provoking God...despis[ing] the word of God” (Num. 15:30-31).

The apostle writes of these: “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again (lit., *keep crucifying again*) for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame...For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26).

How serious such sin is! – apostasy (renouncing Christ), idolatry, absence from Communion, murder, malice, adultery, theft, loss of control in drunkenness and addiction, etc. These are the habitual, and usually public, sins dealt with by *penitence* in the Church (as referred to by St. John Chrysostom above). Restoration to Holy Communion in these cases involves the act of Confession (publicly witnessed in the Orthodox Church), fasting, prayer, and reparation of damage to others, the time of restoration dependent on the severity of the sin and the spiritual condition of the one repenting under the direction of his or her spiritual father (Priest, Father Confessor).

“They who have sinned in divers particulars, if they have persevered in the prayer of confession and penance, and are wholly converted from their faults, shall be received

again to communion, through the mercy and goodness of God, after a time of penance appointed to them, in proportion to the nature of their offense" (*Laodicea*, canon 2). "[The bishop or priest] that has the power of binding and loosing, may lessen the time of penance to an earnest penitent" (*Canons of St. Basil*, 75; see Matt. 16:19; Jn. 20:23; Heb. 13:17).

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Orthodox practice of Holy Communion is the heart and soul of the Orthodox Faith. Holy Communion within the Divine Liturgy of the Word of God and prayer constitutes the "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9; see Matt. 22:1f.). Christ Jesus is the Bridegroom, and the Church, His Body, is the Bride (Matt. 9:15; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-30). Thus Holy Communion is a joyous celebration of life and light in the incorruptible kingdom of God, made possible and in remembrance of all that Christ has accomplished for us, His incarnation, suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to the right hand of the Father, and His out-pouring of the Holy Spirit upon the faithful.

At Holy Communion Jesus Christ remains faithful to us, and we remain faithful to Christ. This is what the apostle Paul means by communing worthily (see 1 Cor. 11:26-34). God the Holy Trinity dwells within His people with all His mercy, grace, and power. Orthodox practice of Holy Communion provides the foretaste of the incomprehensibly marvelous feast to come in God's eternal kingdom where all "pain, sorrow, and sighing" have fled away (Isa. 35:10; Rev. 7:16-17; 21:1-4).

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