

Worthy Reception of Holy Communion (especially at Pascha)

Homily 3 on Ephesians – St. John Chrysostom

1. I observe many partaking of Christ's Body lightly and just as it happens, and rather from custom and form, than consideration and understanding. When, saith a man, the holy season of Lent sets in, whatever a man may be, he partakes of the mysteries, or, when the day of the Lord's Epiphany (i.e., Theophany, the Baptism of Christ) comes. And yet it is not the Epiphany, nor is it Lent, that makes a fit time for approaching, but it is sincerity and purity of soul. With this, approach at all times; without it, never. "For as often," (1 Cor. 11: 26.) saith he, "as ye do this, ye proclaim the Lord's death," i.e., "ye make a remembrance of the salvation that has been wrought for you, and of the benefits which I have bestowed."

Sincerity and purity of soul makes a fit time for approaching Holy Communion. With this, approach at all times; without it never.

2. Consider those who partook of the sacrifices under the old Covenant, how great abstinence did they practice? How did they not conduct themselves? What did they not perform? They were always purifying themselves. And you, when you draw nigh to a sacrifice, at which the very Angels tremble, do you measure the matter by the revolutions of seasons? And how shall you present yourself before the judgment-seat of Christ, you who presume upon His body with polluted hands and lips? You would not presume to kiss a king with an unclean mouth, and do you kiss the King of heaven with an unclean soul? It is an outrage. Tell me, would you choose to come to the Sacrifice with unwashed hands? No, I suppose, not. But you would rather choose not to come at all, than come with soiled hands. And then, thus scrupulous as you are in this little matter, do you come with soiled soul, and thus dare to touch it? And yet the hands hold it but for a time, whereas into the soul it is dissolved entirely. What, do you not see the holy vessels so thoroughly cleansed all over, so resplendent? Our souls ought to be purer than they, more holy, more

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brilliant. And why so? Because those vessels are made so for our sakes. They partake not of Him that is in them, they perceive Him not. But we do;—yes, verily. Now then, you would not choose to make use of a soiled vessel, and do you approach with a soiled soul? Observe the vast inconsistency of the thing.

3. At the other times you come not, no, not though often you are clean; but at Pascha, however flagrant an act you may have committed, you come. Oh! the force of custom and of prejudice! In vain is the daily Sacrifice¹, 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 you should render yourselves worthy to partake. Are you not worthy of the Sacrifice, nor of the participation? If so, then neither are you of the prayer. You hear the herald (i.e., Deacon), standing, and saying, “As many as are in penitence, all pray.”² As many as do not partake, are in penitence. If you are one of those that are in penitence, you ought not to partake; for he that partakes not, is one of those that are in penitence. Why then does he say, “Depart, you that are not qualified to pray,” while you have the effrontery to stand still? But no, you are not of that number, you art of the number of those who are qualified to partake, and yet are indifferent about it, and regard the matter as nothing.

4. Look, I entreat: a royal table is set before you, Angels minister at that table, the King Himself is there, and do you stand gaping? Are your garments defiled, and yet do you make no account of it?—or are they clean? Then fall down and partake. Every day He comes in to see the guests, and converses with them all. Yes, at this moment is he speaking to your conscience; “Friends, how do you stand here, not having on a wedding garment?” (Matt.

¹ The Offering of the Eucharist, Holy Communion.

² Baptized Christians having committed flagrant sins were suspended from Communion until giving evidence of genuine repentance (i.e., in penitence), the final stage being allowed to pray the Liturgy with the others partaking of Communion.

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22:12) He said not, Why did you sit down? No, before he sat down, He declared him to be unworthy, so much as to come in. He saith not, “Why did you sit down to meat,” but, “Why did you come in?” And these are the words that He is at this very moment addressing to one and all of us that stand here with such shameless effrontery. For everyone, that partakes not of the mysteries, is standing here in shameless effrontery. It is for this reason, that they which are in sins are first of all put forth; for just as when a master is present at his table, it is not right that those servants who have offended him should be present, but they are sent out of the way: just so also here when the sacrifice is brought forth, and Christ, the Lord’s sheep, is sacrificed; when you hear the words, “Let us pray together,” when you behold the curtains drawn up, then imagine that the Heavens are let down from above, and that the Angels are descending!

For everyone that is initiated, that partakes not of the mysteries, is standing here in shameless effrontery.

5. As then it is not meet that any one of the uninitiated³ be present, so neither is it that one of them that are initiated, and yet at the same time defiled. Tell me, suppose any one were invited to a feast, and were to wash his hands, and sit down, and be all ready at the table, and after all refuse to partake; is he not insulting the man who invited him? Were it not better for such an one never to have come at all? Now it is just in the same way that you have come here. You have sung the Hymn⁴ with the rest: you have declared yourself to be of the number of them that are Worthy, by not departing with them that are unworthy. Why stay, and yet not partake of the table? I am unworthy, you will say. Then you are also unworthy of that communion you have had in prayers. For it is not by means of the offerings only, but also by means of those canticles that the Spirit descends all around. Do we not see our own

³ I.e., the unbaptized who are then not admitted to the Mystery of Holy Communion.

⁴ The Triumphant Hymn: “Holy, holy, holy...” at the beginning of the Anaphora Prayers.

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servants, first scouring the table with a sponge, and cleaning the house, and then setting out the entertainment? This is what is done by the prayers, by the cry of the herald. We scour the Church, as it were, with a sponge, that all things may be set out in a pure church, that there may be “neither spot nor wrinkle.” (Eph. 5:27) Unworthy, indeed, both our eyes of these sights, and unworthy are our ears! “And if even a beast,” it is said, “touch the mountain, it shall be stoned.” (Ex. 19:13) Thus then they were not worthy so much as to set foot on it, and yet afterwards they both came near, and beheld where God had stood. And you may, afterwards, come near, and behold: when, however, He is present, depart. Thou art no more allowed to be here than the Catechumen⁵ is. For it is not at all the same thing never to have reached the mysteries, and when you have reached them, to stumble at them and despise them, and to make yourself unworthy of this thing. One might enter upon more points, and those more awful still; not however to burden your understanding, these will suffice.

6. They who are not brought to their right senses with these, certainly will not be with more. That I may not then be the means of increasing your

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condemnation, I entreat you, not to forbear coming, but to render yourselves worthy both of being present, and of approaching. Tell me, were any king to give command and to say, “If any man does this, let him partake of my table;” say, would you not do all you could to be admitted? He has invited us to heaven, to the table of the great and wonderful King, and

do we shrink and hesitate, instead of hastening and running to it? And what then is our hope of salvation? We cannot lay the blame on our weakness; we

⁵ In the ancient Church, those being instructed toward baptism (Gk., *catechumens*) departed from the Liturgy prior to the Prayers for Communion.

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cannot on our nature. It is indolence and nothing else that renders us unworthy. So far have I spoken of myself. But may He that pricks the heart, He that gives the Spirit of compunction, pierce your hearts, and plant the seeds in the depth of them, that so through His fear ye may conceive, and bring forth the spirit of salvation, and come near with boldness. For, “thy children,” it is said, “are like olive plants round about thy table.” (Ps. 127:3.) O, then, let there be nothing old, nothing wild, nothing harsh. For of such sort are the young plants that are fit for fruit, for the beautiful fruit, fruit I mean of the olive tree. And thriving they are, so as all to be round about the table, and come together here, not in vain or by chance, but with fear and reverence. For thus shall you behold with boldness even Christ Himself in heaven, and shall be counted worthy of that heavenly kingdom, which may God grant we may all attain, in Jesus Christ, our Lord with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, might, honor, now and ever, and for ages of ages. Amen.

Homily 5 on 1 Timothy – St. John Chrysostom

1. And listen how he delivered them: “When you are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan.” (1 Cor. 5:4) He was then immediately expelled from the common assembly, he was separated from the fold, he became deserted and destitute; he was delivered to the wolf. For as the cloud designated the camp of the Hebrews, so the Spirit distinguished the Church. If anyone therefore was without, he was consumed (cf. Ex. 14:20), and it was by the judgment of the Apostles that he was cast out of the pale. So also the Lord delivered Judas to Satan. For immediately “after the sop Satan entered into him.” (John 13:27) Or this may be said; that those whom they wished to amend, they did not themselves punish, but reserved their punishments for those who were incorrigible. Or otherwise, that they were the more dreaded for delivering

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them up to others. Job also was delivered to Satan, but not for his sins, but for fuller proof of his worth. Many such instances still occur.

2. For since the Priests cannot know who are sinners, and unworthy partakers of the holy Mysteries, God often in this way delivers them to Satan. For when diseases, and attacks, and sorrows, and calamities, and the like occur, it is on this account that they are inflicted. This is shown by Paul. "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." (1 Cor. 11:30) But how? saith one, when we approach but once a year! But this is

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indeed the evil, that you determine the worthiness of your approach, not by the purity of your minds, but by the interval of time. You think it a proper caution not to communicate often; not considering that you are seared by partaking unworthily, though only once, but to receive worthily, though often, is salutary. It is not presumptuous to receive often, but to receive unworthily, though but once in a whole life. But we are so miserably foolish, that,

though we commit numberless offenses in the course of a year, we are not anxious to be absolved from them, but are satisfied, that we do not often make bold impudently to insult the Body of Christ, not remembering that those who crucified Christ, crucified Him but once. Is the offense then the less, because committed but once? Judas betrayed his Master but once. What then, did that exempt him from punishment? Why indeed is time to be considered in this matter? let our time of coming be when our conscience is pure.

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3. The Mystery at Pascha⁶ is not of more efficacy than that which is now celebrated. It is one and the same. There is the same grace of the Spirit, it is always a Passover⁷. You who are initiated know this. On the Preparation (Friday), on the Sabbath (Saturday), on the Lord's day (Sunday), and on the day of Martyrs, it is the same Sacrifice that is performed. "For as often," he saith, "as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you do show the Lord's death." (1 Cor. 11: 26) No time is limited for the performance of this Sacrifice, why then is it then called the Paschal feast? Because Christ suffered for us then. Let not the time, therefore, make any difference in your approach. There is at all times the same power, the same dignity, the same grace, one and the same body; nor is one celebration of it more or less holy than another. And this you know, who see upon these occasions nothing new, save these worldly veils, and a more splendid attendance. The only thing that these days have more is that from them commenced the day of our salvation when Christ was sacrificed. But with respect to these mysteries, those days have no further preëminence.

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4. When you approach to take bodily food, you wash your hands and your mouth, but when you draw nigh to this spiritual food, you do not cleanse your soul, but approach full of uncleanness. But you say, Are not the forty days' fastings⁸ sufficient to cleanse the huge heap of our sins? But of what use is it, tell me? If wishing to store up some precious unguent, you should

⁶ The annual commemoration of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection in the spring of the year.

⁷ *Pascha* (Heb., *Pesach*) means "Passover."

⁸ The 40 day-long pre-Paschal season of Lent.

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make clean a place to receive it, and a little after having laid it up, should throw dung upon it, would not the fine odor vanish? This takes place with us too. We make ourselves to the best of our power worthy to approach; then we defile ourselves again! What then is the good of it? This we say even of those who are able in those forty days to wash themselves clean. Let us then, I beseech you, not neglect our salvation, that our labor may not be in vain. For he who turns from his sins, and goes and commits the same again, is “like a dog that returneth to his vomit.” (Prov. 26:11) But if we act as we ought, and take heed to our ways, we shall be thought worthy of those high rewards, which that we may all obtain, God grant through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

