



## **On the Church's Guidelines for Holy Communion**

by Father Harry Linsinbigler

*(Note: the following three-part article appeared in modified form in several issues of the Ukrainian Orthodox Word)*

Recently I have been asked a very significant question from several different people regarding parish life and practice: “*What are the Church's guidelines for Communion?*” It is important for our Faithful to be clear as to what is expected of them with regard to taking Holy Communion.

As with many things in Orthodoxy that involve individual circumstance, we are given a “**field**” of **acceptability**, where each Bishop for His diocese (or **Spiritual Father** for parishioners-- cf. Canon 102 of 6<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council) may use “*exactness*” or “*economy*”. It is somewhere in between these two “**gates of the sheepfold**”, based on the circumstances of each, that the “*sheep*” are encouraged to roam by the Pastors of the Church.

The Orthodox Church already has basic guidelines for Communion established through Scripture, canons, service books, and writings of the Fathers. Although some Bishops, based on particular local circumstances within the diocese, may impose further guidelines than what the whole Church as adopted (for instance, requiring confession prior to each partaking, fasting beyond the calendar of the Church, etc.), many refrain from doing so in order to avoid laying a burden too hard to bear upon the faithful, and thus abide by the guidelines of the whole Church. The guidelines listed below include Communion guidelines that have been put forth in Scripture, Ecumenical and Local councils, Orthodox Canon Law, the writings of the Fathers and the service books. These give the priests and the people a clear idea of the “**range of acceptability**” with regard to partaking of the Most Holy Mystery of the Eucharist.

One of the first principles for partaking of Communion comes directly from Scripture:

*--Whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let*

*him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.* (Holy Scripture: 1 Cor. 11.27,28)

This sobering passage is one of several reminders that the reception of Holy Communion is for those members of the Flock who have prepared themselves properly and abide by the guidelines of the Church. Prior to the reception of Holy Communion, therefore, a person must examine himself/herself, do repentance as is necessary, ask the Lord to make him worthy by grace, and then partake. He or she must believe all matters of Faith in accord with the Church, above all the Symbol of the Orthodox Faith (i.e. the Creed, which each Communicant says with the rest of the Faithful at every Divine Liturgy), and that truly Christ is the Son of the Living God and truly the Communion He gives us by the Holy Spirit from the Father is His Body and Blood, which we also confess at every Divine Liturgy.

Holy Communion, therefore, is for those Orthodox Christians (members of the Holy Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ) who live the life of Christ, coming regularly to His Holy House in prayer, loving God above all, one's brothers and sisters in Christ, one's neighbour, and keeps the love of self in balance. Such persons attempt to fill their days with good and charitable deeds, prayer, and moderation (by fasting to the best of their ability on fast days and, on other days, refraining from gluttony, drunkenness, and lack of sobriety). Such a person must be in good standing, and not under penance, nor a state of mortal sin. According to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of the Typikon, the person should keep properly the preceding week as a Christian--that is, in prayer, feasting and fasting in accord with the calendar of the Church as far as possible, and approach the Chalice in a state of spiritual sobriety. The *Pedalion of the Orthodox Catholic Church* (Book of Canon Law of the Orthodox Church) states of those who commune that they should do so "with the proper preparation of contrition, confession of sins, satisfactory atonement (i.e. make right what you wronged as much as possible), and, as far as possible, fasting..." (p22).

### **And as far as possible, fasting...**

There are two types of food fasts that the Orthodox Christian should be particularly aware of regarding preparation for Communion. One is not eating anything from midnight Saturday night/Sunday morning until the partaking of Communion, which is known as Eucharistic fasting. The other is Ascetical fasting on most Wednesdays and Fridays and during fast periods, where the type of food eaten is restricted and, during the daytime, the amount is also restricted. St. Isaac of Syria states that all have the duty to fast the ascetical fast at least to some degree on days that are set aside for this purpose: "*If you cannot fast for two days, fast at least until evening; if you cannot fast until evening, be careful not to overeat.*"

One must remember that fasting in the Christian sense is not simply abstaining from food, but first and foremost is abstention from gluttony and enslavement to other sins as well. *"Let us fast an acceptable and very pleasing fast to the Lord. True fast is the estrangement from evil, temperance of tongue, abstinence from anger, separation from desires, slander, falsehood, perjury. Privation of these is true fasting"* (Hymn in 1st Mon. of Lent, by St. Basil the Great). Likewise St. John Chrysostom states *"Fasting is a spiritual perfume. ... I have said this, not for the purpose of condemning those who have eaten, but that I may show the advantages of fasting. I do not, however, call mere abstinence from meats fasting; but **abstinence from sin is fasting even before refraining from food**"* (*On the Statues* Hom. 10). We do this together as a Church, with each one doing it to the best of their ability by several different fasting practices.

The first and foremost means to enact the fast is by limiting the amount of food that goes into the mouth. We do this both for the Eucharistic fast several hours before receiving communion, as well as the absolute ascetical fast (which during Lent may also coincide with Eucharistic fasting for Presanctified Liturgies, particularly Wednesdays and Fridays) on designated fast days in which, during the morning and early afternoon food is very limited more than on non-fast days. Limiting the kind of food (no flesh-meat, no eggs, etc.) is a secondary kind of engagement in fasting and self control known as partial abstention. The Church also does this Wednesdays and Fridays and days of Lent. Sometimes, there is an ascetical fast and no strict fast. Again, we are to do these acts so that together we may truly fast from evil as a Body of Christ.

By canon law, unless one is naturally in a state of fasting *because of age* (the young and the elderly) or by *"bodily necessity"* (Gangra Can. 19, i.e. infirmity, illness such as diabetes or other legitimate medical restriction), one must fast from all food prior to partaking of Communion from midnight of the night before.

Canon 8 (Q&A) of St. Timothy states that

*"Fasting was devised in order to humble the body. If, therefore, the body is already in a state of humbleness and illness or weakness, the person ought to partake of as much as he or she may will and be able to get along with food and drink"*

But what if I don't have diabetes, and am not sick, and have not eaten anything Sunday morning, but I accidentally swallow water or toothpaste when brushing my teeth?" Canon 16 (Q&A) of St. Timothy states:

*"If anyone fasting with a view to communion, while washing his mouth, or in the bath, has swallowed water involuntarily, ought he to commune? Answer: Yes, Since Satan has found an occasion whereby to prevent him from partaking of communion, he will*

*keep on doing this more frequently.”*

As for Ascetical fasting, following many of the Holy Fathers, all are encouraged to keep fasting from evil first and foremost, while feasting and fasting to the best of one’s ability in accord with feasts of the Church (Can. 89 of 6<sup>th</sup>, 1 of Dionysius) and the fasts of the Church (esp. great Lent—cf. Canon 69 of the Apostles and Can. 29 of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ec. Council). On weeks when it is a feast, we feast, and when it is a fast, we fast. The Church herself expects all to enjoy, in moderation (for overindulgence you cannot enjoy, but get sick to the stomach, etc.), life’s bounty and variety as much as is possible according to the calendar and discipline of the Church—and to come to Communion on a regular basis after having examined themselves and asking God to bestow worthiness upon them.

### **Attendance on Sunday**

In order to partake of Communion one should have been in the Church in order to hear the Epistle and Gospel, and thus should be in Church for the whole Divine Liturgy. However, it is evident from the structure of the services and the requirements of Faith (i.e. that the person affirms the Faith in the Creed before partaking, that the person is part of the Faithful and the offering), that the person who is about to Commune absolutely MUST be in prayerful attendance for the Liturgy of the Faithful (i.e. for the prayers of the Faithful preceding the Great Entrance), including the Entrance when the gifts are presented, for the Peace and the Creed, and for the entire Anaphora (Eucharistic Offering). If a person was not in Church to hear “*The doors guard the doors, In Wisdom Let us Attend*” then that person wasn’t in Church early enough. Communion is a natural continuation of participating in the entire Eucharist, which begins back at the Entrance, and indeed, even before this point. The “**doors**” are the doors which used to be shut and no one allowed in after the priest made this exclamation. No one, in good conscience, should come to Communion who arrives after these words are spoken unless there is extreme and irregular circumstance (an accident that day, etc.), of which the priest should be informed and, with such knowledge, give of the Sacred Gifts or withhold them as is deemed appropriate in the circumstance. If there is doubt on the part of the Communicant as to whether he or she should partake, he or she should approach the priest after Divine Liturgy if he has not yet consumed the gifts and abide by his counsel for that Sunday.

### **Confession and Communion**

The Orthodox Church’s basic guidelines for Confession before Communion are enumerated below.

As for the laws of the Church, by canon law one must partake of the Mystery of Repentance (i.e. Confession, in which mortal or grievous sins must be specifically confessed vocally to one's confessor—"confess your sins one to another," cf. Can 5 of 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council) and fulfil any penances before partaking of Communion under the following circumstances:

1. Is in a state of mortal sin. There are some sins which by their grievous nature cause spiritual and psychological pathologies which are harmful to themselves and others (if there is a pattern of the following it indicates that a serious pathology of one or both types is already there):

1. Blasphemy, denial of Christ, apostasy, idolatry, mutilation of one's own body (i.e. castration, cutting oneself, etc.), the denial of the goodness of God's Creation or abuse of God's creation, sacrilege including the spurning of the Sacraments, sorcery & witchcraft, murder, pedophilia, bestiality, incest, extramarital intercourse (adultery), non-marital sexual intercourse or activity (opposite sex or same sex), theft and other acts of covetousness and greed, bearing false witness against neighbor (perjury and other related sins), intentional harm to the human body whether alive or dead, whether yourself or another's, substance abuse, extortion; grievous unrepentant and uncorrected acts of disrespect/reviling toward Christ, his Church, bishop, priest, parents, spouse, police and other authority figures, and uncorrected acts of schism and divisiveness within the Church (cf. 1 Cor. 5.11, 6.9-10; Can. 2-4 of St. Gregory Nyssa and Canons of St. Basil).

2. In a state of uncorrected sin which has caught the upper hand and has ballooned out of control and caused pathology or severe addiction and cut one off from the life in Christ. According to the Canons of the Church, "***it is a mortal sin for sinners to remain uncorrected in their sin***" (Canon 5 of the 7<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council). Because many have a difficult time recognizing this in themselves, confrontational intervention from pastors, therapists, and loved ones may be needed.

Canon 2 of Antioch is very clear: "As for all those persons who enter the church and listen to the sacred Scriptures, but who fail to commune in prayer together and at the same time with the laity, or who shun the participation of the Eucharist, in accordance with some irregularity, we decree that these persons be cast out of the Church until, after going to Confession and exhibiting fruits of repentance, and begging for forgiveness, they succeed in obtaining a pardon. Furthermore, we decree that communion with those excluded from communion is not allowed, nor in another church is it to be allowed to admit [to communion] those who have no admittance to another [Orthodox] church."

T The reason for this is not to be “too strict”, but rather that the person may not acquire sickness or death for partaking of Communion in a state of separation, “**for he that eats or drinks unworthily eats and drinks condemnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s Body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep [i.e. have died]**” (1 Cor. 11.29-30).

One may be put under penance, not allowed to go to Communion, until they have “*cleaned up their act*” with regard to sin. This allows time to be restored through spiritual exercises to move once again into a state of preparedness to receive.

3. Also requiring reconciliation through Penitence and Confession are those who have not partaken of Communion (Can. 9 of the Apostles and Can. 2 of Antioch) or failed to go to Liturgy for **three or more Sundays in a row** without “grave necessity”, health difficulties or for reason of great distance in travel (Can 80 of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council). Once a person knows of this statute he or she is bound to go to Confession and after receiving the absolution and blessing of the priest to partake of Communion as regularly as possible.
4. If any are currently under penance they must fulfil the time of penance and receive release and absolution prior to partaking of Communion or otherwise are to be formally excommunicated for a greater period of time (Apostolic Can. and Nic.An.25).

However, that being said, we also must acknowledge that there have been different practices from one Local Church to another regarding the relationship of Confession to Communion as well. Although the Orthodox tradition as a whole makes no theological requirement of Confession before every partaking of Communion “under any circumstance”, most Orthodox Dioceses require taking Confession at least once a year even if one is a regular Communicant of the Church for their own Spiritual welfare.

One Orthodox Patriarchate requires Confession before each partaking. Other Patriarchates and Dioceses do not require Confession for regular Communicants outside of mortal sin or lapse in attendance. Still others emphasize taking it during each of the four fasting periods, and still others emphasize once a month. With regard to those who have not committed a sin which separates one from the Church (i.e. sins which are, as St. John the Theologian says, “not unto death” that we may simply “pray about” for forgiveness cf. 1 John 5), and who Commune regularly after preparing to the best of their ability, they are not required, unless bid so by their spiritual father, to partake of the Sacrament of Confession before each partaking of Eucharist, as canon 80 of the 6<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council indicates.

As St. Basil the Great has taught us, there is that sin which separates us because we have been overcome by it (**and this requires confession**), and on the other hand is the common sin which is

overcome daily through prayer and through other pious means by grace, enabling the person to remain in the regular life of the Church. This is in accord with the teachings of St. John the Theologian, that “*there is sin unto death...all unrighteousness is sin, but there is sin not unto death*” (1 John 5.16-17). In this passage, St. John states that if anyone sees his brother sinning sin which is “not unto death” (i.e. non-mortal sins) and prays about it, it will be forgiven. However, St. John also points out that there is “Sin which is unto death” for which simple or private prayer is not enough. For this, there is Penance (i.e. Confession), which includes reparation as much as possible as well as practices to make well the deep sickness in our soul that results from **mortal sin** (i.e. “sin unto death), culminating in a verbal confession of sins to the Church in the Mystery of Christ of Binding and Loosing to the person of the priest and being obedient in penitence.

Nevertheless, although no set time has ever been established for Confession throughout the whole Church, frequent Confession is encouraged for anyone who derives spiritual benefit from doing it more, if in accord with one’s spiritual Father, since the same canon states that different methods and spiritual medicines and frequency of spiritual medicine will differ from person to person. **St. Symeon of Thessalonica recommends for most to go once a month.** Another Father recommends at least 4 times per year. As stated before, most dioceses either mandate or recommend going no less than once a year. Once a person receives the Mystery of Holy Confession (Holy Repentance) in a proper manner (i.e. not hiding any mortal sin during the confession—see below for instances in which Confession must be taken before Communion), he or she should as soon as possible receive Communion, since Communion is the seal of all things and unites us back fully to the Church.

St. Nicholas Cabasilas (14<sup>th</sup> c.) says: “We must resort to the priests on account of our sins so that we may drink of the cleansing Blood. But...we should by no means commit great offences thereby bringing guilt upon ourselves so as to be excluded from the Holy Table. It is the impious who disrespectfully approach the sacred Gifts after committing a sin unto death; but those who are not afflicted with such diseases [i.e. those who have not committed mortal sins] **may not rightly flee from that Bread.** For those who are still in their wills fighting its coals it is right to beware of the Fire and not receive Christ to dwell with them until they have been reconciled to Him. Those whose wills are rightly disposed but who are sickly in other respects have need of the strengthening medicine (i.e. Holy Communion), and should themselves be taken to Him who gives spiritual health, and who ‘*has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases*’ (*Life in Christ* 6.14).

### **How Frequently should we Commune?**

How frequently are we to take Communion? St. Makarios of Corinth in the 18th century teaches us that

*"to receive Communion the usual two or three times a year is good and helpful, but to receive Communion more frequently is far better. Remember, the nearer a person comes to the light, the more light he gets. The closer he draws to the fire, the warmer he is. The nearer he approaches sanctity, the more saintly he becomes. In the same way, the more frequently one draws near to God in Holy Communion, the more one receives light and warmth and holiness. My friend, if you are worthy of making your Communion two or three times a year, you are worthy of making it more often, as St. John Chrysostom tells us", for we are called to maintain preparation and call upon God's bestowal of worthiness all year round even to take it once a year. St. Makarios continues, "But what does stop us from taking Communion? The answer is our carelessness and laziness. And we give way to these faults so much that we are not sufficiently prepared to be able to receive Communion...Where did God or any one of the Saints for that matter, bid us Communicate [only] two or three times a year? Nowhere is this found..." He then goes on to point out that "It is both necessary and very beneficial to the soul for a person to receive Communion frequently. It is also in obedience to the commandment of God...the proper time is the moment that the priest exclaims 'In the fear of God and with faith and love draw near.' Is this heard only three times a year? Oh, no. Yet although everyone must eat two or three times a day in order that the material body may live, must the unfortunate soul only eat three times a year or perhaps even once--the food that gives it life in order to live the spiritual life? And isn't this completely absurd?"*

St. Ambrose points out

*"God gave us this Bread as a daily affair, and we make it a yearly affair."*

St. Basil the Great states that

*"It is good and beneficial to receive communion every day, and to partake of the holy body and blood of Christ. For he distinctly says, '**He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has everlasting life.**' And who doubts that to share frequently in life, is the same thing as to have manifold life. Truthfully I communicate four times a week: on the Lord's day, and Wednesday, on Friday, and on the Sabbath, and on the other days if there is a commemoration of any Saint" (Letter 93).*

The Faithful are supposed to, in a well disciplined manner with the right frame of mind, partake of



Communion every Sunday and holy days, as Sts. Gregory and Symeon of Thessalonika state (cf. p951 of the Philokalia, and chap. 360) and Sts. Nikodemos and Agapios of the Holy Mountain, compilers of the *Pedalion of the Orthodox Catholic Church* (the book of Canon Law of the Orthodox Church), likewise upheld. But the canons themselves mandate frequency in partaking of Communion. Canon 9 of the Holy Apostles states the following:

“All the Faithful [not under penance] who enter and listen to the Scriptures, but do not stay for prayer and Holy Communion must be excommunicated, on the ground that they are causing disorder in the Church.”

Likewise the following from the words of the 12<sup>th</sup> century canonist Zonaras: “*The present Canon demands that all those who are in the church when the Holy Sacrifice is being performed shall patiently remain to the end for prayer and Holy Communion*” (page 21 of the *Pedalion*).

The commentary on the eighth and ninth Apostolic Canons emphasizes this:

“*The commands of these canons are very strict and severe, for they excommunicate those who come to the Liturgy but do not remain until the end and take Communion*”  
(*Pedalion/Rudder, Com.Can 9*).

The notion that one should abstain because one is “not worthy” is rejected by the Holy Fathers, since we humble ourselves in repentance and then rely on God giving us his grace. We become worthy by God’s energy even if we are not worthy from our own. We do this by admitting our faults and shortcomings on a weekly basis to all whom we have wronged. St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain has the following to say regarding this very point:

“*There is no doubt from a Patristic and historical point of view: It is necessary for the faithful and Orthodox Christians to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord frequently throughout our lives, so long as there is no objection from our spiritual father, and that frequent Communion produces great benefits for the soul and body; while delaying this, on the contrary, produces many harmful and destructive results.*”

The Council of Constantinople of 1819 endorsed the teachings of these “Kollyvades Fathers” (i.e. St. Nikodemos, St. Makarios of Corinth and the rest) insistence that Communion should be partaken of regularly by clergy and faithful alike. This is simply a reaffirmation of what the Orthodox Church has always officially held down through the ages. For our Lord Himself warned, “***unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you***” (John 6.53). The verbs “eat” (Gr. faghte, phagite) and “drink” (Gr. pihte, pite) do not connote a one time event, but a continuous practice of eating and drinking. Thus, just as we eat food and drink on a regular basis to give the body life, we eat the Heavenly Food and Drink to give both Body and Soul

eternal life: **“Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day...He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in Him... He who eats this Bread will live forever”** (John 6.54-58).

Therefore we ought always examine ourselves, seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters in Christ, family, friends, co-workers and neighbors, partaking of Repentance (Confession) as often as conscience and proper conduct yield, and preparing through acts of goodness, relying upon God and trusting that He will bestow worthiness upon us. For we are not able to partake of Communion because we have in some way made ourselves worthy, but rather because we are a member of the redeemed community in which Christ is in the midst. St. John Cassian states:

*"We must not avoid Communion because we consider ourselves sinful. We must approach it more often for the healing of the soul...that considering ourselves unworthy...we would long even more the medicine for our wounds. Otherwise it is impossible to receive Communion once a year, as certain people do...considering the sanctification of heavenly Mysteries as available only to Saints...such people manifest more pride than humility, for when they receive, they think of themselves as worthy. It is better to think that by giving us grace, the Sacrament makes us pure and holy...It is much better if, in humility of heart, knowing that we are never worthy of the Holy Mysteries, we would receive them every Sunday for the healing of our diseases."*

We must rely upon Christ to make us worthy and not the things that we do. For *"only God is good,"* as our Lord says, and it is He that works within us and His worthiness which enables us. As St. Basil the Great has formulated in a preparatory prayer before communion,

*"I know that I am unworthy to receive your Holy Body and Precious Blood...But trusting in your loving-kindness I come unto you who said: He that eats my Body and drinks my blood shall abide in me and I in Him. Therefore, O Lord, have compassion on me and make not an example of me, your sinful servant. But do unto me according to your great mercy, and grant that these these Holy Gifts may be for me unto healing, purification, enlightenment, protection, salvation...the Communion of the Holy Spirit...and for Life Eternal. Amen."*

In the pre-Communion prayers we pray to the Lord Jesus Christ that we may be united to His Body and Blood and have Him, with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, dwelling and abiding within us.

## **In Conclusion**

In accordance with the above guidelines Orthodox Christians may partake of Eucharist as follows:

1. If under penance or a ban must complete the time and penance allotted.
2. If committing a sin unto death (see above), or even if remaining uncorrected in “**sin not unto death**” as Scripture calls it, or if having missed Liturgy without a valid reason for more than three weeks (the local hierarch may narrow this time), one must partake of Confession and then approach.
3. In all other cases, Orthodox Christians who after examining themselves truly approach “**with the fear of God, faith and love,**” and say the prayer “*I believe O Lord*” prior to taking Communion with awareness and sincerity in what is being said. So then, we will finish with the words of one of the Canons of the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople:

*"If anyone wills to be a participator of the immaculate Body and Blood in the time of the Synaxis, and to offer himself for the Communion, let Him draw near, arranging his hands in the form of a cross, and so let him receive the Communion of grace" (Can. 101).*

Source: [http://www.orthodox-christian-comment.co.uk/confession\\_communion\\_preparation\\_for\\_communion.htm](http://www.orthodox-christian-comment.co.uk/confession_communion_preparation_for_communion.htm)