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Preparation to Holy Communion

We must prepare ourselves to the Mystery of the Holy Communion by praying, fasting, humble Christian behavior and spirit as well as by confession.

Home and church prayers. A person willing to prepare oneself properly to the Holy Christ's Mysteries must prayerfully prepare himself to that at least 2-3 days before the Communion: to pray at home more and with greater ardor, to read the Scripture, to attend church services. Before the Communion day one must attend the Vespers service on the eve. At home one should read the "Prayers in Preparation for the Holy Communion."

Fasting. During fasting periods we should control ourselves more strictly. On other days we must be moderate with food. We must be more concentrated, we should not watch television or listen to frenzied music.

Confession. If you want to receive Holy Communion you must sincerely repent all of your sins before the priest before or after the Vespers on the eve of the Holy Communion. You must wholeheartedly open up your soul not concealing a single sin. Before the Confession you must make peace with everybody who hurt you or whom you hurt, you have to humbly ask all of them for forgiveness. While confessing it is better not to wait for the priest's questions, but to tell him everything that is bothering your conscience, not justifying yourself and not blaming anyone else for anything. By no means you should judge anyone during confession or tell about other people's sins.

If it is impossible to confess in the evening, you must do it before the Liturgy, in any case it should be done before the Cherubic Hymn. Nobody except children before the age of 7 can receive Holy Communion without the prior

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Confession. There is a good tradition: after the Confession and before the Holy Communion we should not eat, drink or smoke. We must not do it after midnight in any case. We should come to the Holy Communion with nothing in our stomachs. We must also teach our children to abstain from food or drinks before the Holy Communion.

How Often Should One Receive the Holy Communion?

*"Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood,
you have no life in you" (Jn. 6:53).*

The Church does not give an unambiguous answer to this question. The early Christians received Holy Communion every Sunday. With time the norms of righteousness changed and not always for the better. In the 19th century many Russian Christians received Holy Communion through the Great Lent. After the Russian Calvary of the 20th century many Russians began receiving the Holy Communion often, which is very good.

Somebody familiar with the Gospel would not need explanations of how great the sacredness of Christ's Holy Body and Blood is and why we cannot enter the Life Eternal without receiving the Holy Communion (this was mentioned by the Lord Himself in His conversation with the Jews, Jn. Chapter 6). But the Orthodox faithful know also that one can approach the Holy Communion only being prepared to it, trying to cleanse one's soul from sins and passions. A silent prayer of John Chrysostom's Liturgy says, "No one bound by the bodily passions and lust is allowed to approach or come close or serve Thee, King of Glory."

The church leaves the question of how often we can receive Holy Communion to be answered by the clergy and spiritual fathers. It is with your spiritual father that you must come to a conclusion about how often you can receive the Holy Communion and how strict your fasting should be before that.

At any rate one should try to receive the Holy Communion at least once during all long lent periods as well as on the day of one's Angel, that is on the day when the saint, whose name one is bearing, is commemorated. If there is no church where one lives, one has to find possibility to go to a place where one can receive Holy Communion at least once a year, otherwise one can be lost for the Church. People who try to make their lives closer to the Church are advised by their priests to receive Holy Communion once or twice a month. Sometimes spiritual fathers bless people for receiving Holy Communion more often.

At the Sacred Chalice.

Not long ago in one of the churches of St. Petersburg during the Divine Liturgy the attention of the people taking Communion was attracted by a little fair-haired boy who was standing not far from the altar. He was watching attentively those receiving Communion and from time to time started laughing in a loud childish manner. He was asked to behave reasonably, but of no avail. The strange behavior of the boy stopped as soon as the Communion was over. His parents who had been very much surprised asked why he was laughing and this is what the boy replied:

"When I was looking at people approaching the Chalice, I suddenly noticed that a white dove flies up to some of them. Just at the moment when a man or a woman opens his or her mouth to partake of the Gifts the dove pecks the Gifts off the spoon and flies away. They do not see the dove, they close their mouths thinking that they have received the Holy Communion, but in deed they have just had an empty spoon. I thought that was very funny."

For a non-believer this story told by a child could appear as something imagined, and an Orthodox heart cannot but be overcome with awe having understood the meaning of the vision sent to a child. Indeed, it is frightening to realize that the Lord would not let some of us have the Communion because we approach the Sacred Chalice

being unworthy and unprepared.

"For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the Body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor. 11:29) — Apostle Paul tells us. There are rules which if followed would help us to accept the Sacred Gifts worthily: abstinence from matrimonial relations for the whole of that time, repentance, prayer, reading of the Scripture and attendance of church services — each one to be fulfilled as much as possible. One should confess before the Communion. Only when a person is taking Communion several days at a stretch as, for example at the end of the Great Lent, or during some of the Holidays, we can receive Communion with the permission of the Father and without going to confession again.

But supposing everything is done correctly. The Divine Liturgy is almost over and the partaker is ready to commune with Christ. The Gates are opened.

"In fear and with faith draw near..." — proclaims the deacon. Faith and fear of God — this is what should be imprinted in the heart of every person approaching the Sacred Chalice. We must not talk or fuss at that point. But in reality...

Haven't almost every one of us been a witness to how pushy people can get in front of the Sacred Chalice? People elbow their way trying to reach the Sacred Gifts earlier than others and paying no attention to what their Father is saying. But the unseemly behavior in front of the Sacred Chalice can destroy all of our hard efforts of preparation to Communion. And then instead of Life Eternal we would get condemnation and God's punishment.

To prevent that, every partaker should know and follow the rules of the Church concerning the way to approach the Sacred Chalice. They are:

- In front of the Sacred Chalice we have to bow. If there are many partakers, we must make the bow

beforehand.

- When the Gates are being opened we must make the sign of the Cross and fold our forearms on the chest, the right arm forming a cross over the left one. When receiving Communion and walking away from the Chalice we should keep the arms in that position.
 - The people serving at the altar are the first to partake, then — the monks, children and all the rest of the parish. We must give way to other people and by no means push each other aside.
 - Women must wipe lipstick off of their lips.
 - Having approached the Chalice one must pronounce his or her name loudly and distinctly. We must accept the Gifts, chew (if needed) and swallow immediately and kiss the lower part of the Chalice as it symbolizes the Lord's rib.
 - We must not touch the Chalice with our hands or kiss the priest's hand.
 - We must not make the sign of the Cross near the Chalice! When you are lifting your hand to make the sign of the Cross, you may push the priest and spill the Sacred Gifts.
 - Having withdrawn towards the little table we should eat antidoron and drink the blessed wine.
 - If the Sacred Gifts are distributed from several Chalices, each person can partake from only one of them. We cannot partake of Sacred Gifts more than once in a day.
 - It is a rule that you do not kneel on the day of the Communion with the exception of the bows made in front of the Shroud of Christ on Great Saturday and praying on knees on the day of the Holy Trinity.
 - Having returned home one should first of all read the gratitude post-communion prayers. If they are read in church after the service, you should listen to them there.
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