

**PREPARING TO RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION
IN A WORTHY MANNER**

“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.” (I COR. 11:27)

“Having partaken of the divine, holy, most pure, and awesome Mysteries of Christ, let us worthily give thanks unto the Lord.” This petition in the **LITANY OF THANKSGIVING** beautifully and profoundly expresses both our understanding of the meaning of the Eucharist and our experience of partaking of the Eucharist. Yet, we do not want to receive the **‘awesome Mysteries of Christ’** in what St. Paul called an **“unworthy manner.”** Rather, our aim is to approach the Chalice in a “worthy manner.” This demands spiritual sobriety together with a sense of responsibility and preparation on our part. The following is a guide into the time-honored practices that will assist us in the pursuit of that aim.

+ Christ taught: *“So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”* (MATT. 5:23-24) The saints have always made a connection between these words of Christ and our approach to the altar, first with our gifts of bread and wine, and then to receive the Holy Gifts of the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion. If there is any open or hidden hostility in our hearts towards others; any anger or bitterness; any hatred, even – we must first be reconciled with our “neighbor” before receiving Holy Communion and we should confess our sins before our priest/spiritual father in the Mystery of Repentance (Confession).

+ A once-a-year Confession for regular or frequent communicants is simply inadequate. With the passage of long periods of time, we easily forget – or learn to live with - the many sins that we need to confess. For this reason, the official OCA Encyclical on **CONFESSION AND COMMUNION** (written by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann and approved by our Holy Synod of Bishops) urges regular communicants to confess every six to eight weeks. This is certainly an ideal that we could aim at. I would suggest at least using the four fasting seasons of the liturgical year as a guide toward establishing a “rhythm” of periodic confession. If our participation in the Liturgy is sporadic, meaning, simply, that we are absent from church for long stretches at a time, then we need first to come to Confession before receiving Holy Communion. We will be and remain unprepared to receive Holy Communion in a “worthy manner” if we are unwilling to confess our sins in the Mystery of Repentance with some regularity.

+ As part of preparation we need to attend the Saturday evening Great Vespers with regularity. This service leads us into Sunday – the Lord’s Day – and thus “sets our sights” on the Lord Who comes to us in the Liturgy and offers Himself to us in the

Eucharist as the *“Bread of life.”* (JN. 6:48) In the evening following Great Vespers, or early Sunday morning (or even spread out during the week as a sort of preparation and “build up”) we should carefully read the **PRAYERS IN PREPARATION FOR HOLY COMMUNION**. These prayers are of an incomparable spiritual depth, teaching us to pray with the “mind of the Church,” which is essentially the “mind of Christ.” Having come to great Vespers or not, care should be taken as to how we spend our Saturday evening. “Intense socializing” on Saturday evening (“parties” and the like, let us say) is really incompatible with receiving Holy Communion on Sunday morning. This holds equally true for our teen-agers. By way of example and counsel parents and adults need to help them develop a deepening sense of responsibility and choice as they grow into a more mature Christian life.

+ Fasting is an important aspect of our preparation. We regularly fast on Wednesdays and Fridays and then there are the periodic seasons of fasting throughout the course of the liturgical year. (There are also fast-free periods). What is the fast of the Church? To abstain from meat, fish, and dairy products on Wednesdays and Fridays and generally on the other days of fasting during lenten seasons (exceptions are marked on the Church calendar). The “American version” of the Church’s fast usually tempts us with minimalism, but this is hardly ever spiritually sound. Our aim and goal is to be as “maximalist” as possible, for Christ taught: *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”* (MATT. 4:4)

+ On the morning of the Liturgy, we do not eat or drink anything. (Exceptions for reasons of health, pregnancy, etc. are certainly made but need to be discussed with the parish priest). Slowly introducing our children to the practice of fasting will teach them to use Jesus and the saints as ‘models’ for their own lives; enable them to learn some discipline; and simply make an aspect of Church life a “natural” part of their daily lives. They will grow into it. If we disregard the fasting discipline of the Church, then we have not fully prepared ourselves to receive Holy Communion.

+ Needless to say, the Divine Liturgy is not the religious equivalent of a “pit stop,” the “express lane,” or a “fast food emporium.” And Holy Communion is not a quick early morning “spiritual lift” that enables us to “feel good.” The Divine Liturgy unfolds itself in a meaningful progression that leads to the Lord’s banquet table in the Kingdom. It is **“meet and right”** to be there for the entire journey. The later we arrive during the Liturgy, the more problematic becomes our participation in the Eucharist. In fact, if we are so late as to miss the reading of the Holy Gospel (for avoidable reasons), then we should refrain from receiving Holy Communion.

+ We are never “worthy” to receive Holy Communion. It is not something that we “earn” or “merit.” If that was the case, then it would no longer be a **Gift**. However, through thoughtful and prayerful preparation, we can approach the chalice – by the grace of God – in a “worthy manner.” As Blessed Augustine wrote: “If you received worthily,

you are what you have received.” We should not feel the pressure to conform ourselves to what others are doing. Rather, our desire is to conform ourselves to Christ in ***“faith, hope and love.”*** (I COR. 13:13) If we have faith in Christ; if we hope in Christ; if we have love for Christ, then our preparation is actually a “blessed obedience” and a “joyful labor.”

NOTE: All of the above presupposes a kind of “eucharistic revival” that we are experiencing as Orthodox Christians in North America. Simply stated, for about a generation now, a great many of the Orthodox faithful are receiving the Eucharist regularly at the Divine Liturgy. This is a return or restoration of both the theology and practice of the early Church. In this understanding of the Eucharist and its reception, **not** to receive Holy Communion meant that a person was laboring under a penance or excommunication. Therefore, the frequent and regular participation in the Eucharist among the present-day faithful is hardly an “innovation” or “novelty,” but the resumption of an apostolic practice so greatly needed for the upbuilding of our parishes. For this reason, spiritual vigilance and care are of the utmost importance.