

THE NARTHEX

January-February 2016

'And the disciples were first called
Christians in Antioch' (Acts 11:26)

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Receiving The Holy Gifts

"...The more one approaches the light, the more one is illumined; and the more one approaches fire, the more one is warmed; the more one approaches holiness, the more one is sanctified; similarly, the more one approaches God through Communion, the more one is enlightened, warmed and sanctified. My brother or sister, if you are worthy to commune two or three times a year, you are worthy to commune more often."

[Holy Father Makarios of Corinth, + 1805]

Towards the end of the end of the Classical world and the Christian Conversion of Europe, the practice of receiving Holy Communion regularly and frequently disappeared. What had been a normal part of the spiritual lives of early Christians began, gradually, to die out as the Church expanded, first into the old empire and then on into the Barbarian lands. The same was true of the Western Patriarchate before the great Schism of 1054. For many, during the Middle Ages, receiving communion was only an annual event, usually around Easter, following the fast of Lent. It was at least one of the good features of the Protestant Reformation in England that people were required to communicate *three* times a year. However, following the Civil War, up until the nineteenth century, it was quite common for Anglican parish churches only to celebrate their communion service once a month, if that.

Our Orthodox experience might have a different context, of course, but the fact remains that, particularly in the Slavic traditions, there has been a consistent teaching that the Holy Gifts may only be received if one has been to confession beforehand. The unforeseen (or perhaps foreseen) pastoral effect of this has been that individuals have been reluctant to approach the chalice.

Scholars of the development of

the Liturgy have often pointed out that the 4th Century witnessed a marked increase in the sense of awe and fear around the mystery of communion. They point to the development of the rituals and ceremonial that surrounded the service. As a result the faithful, out of a heightened sense of piety, were unwilling to approach and receive the Holy Gifts, focussing on their unworthiness, although, of course, children below the age of reason were still brought up to the chalice. (1)

In part, the scholars might be correct here but I do not think it the whole story. Alongside the perfectly legitimate sense of awe that one would and should expect, there is also the temptation to spiritual indolence, and sloth. Or perhaps there is the fear and embarrassment that often surrounds confession for many people, rooted in pride and a reluctance to be honest about the state of our soul before another person (albeit the priest). This in turn results in a spiritually disastrous situation: no confession and hence, no communion. This state of affairs is still true for many believers.

Interestingly, there is a kind of opposite problem for many of those who do come to communion frequently - not a lack of awe before the sacramental presence of Christ but rather, the dangers associated with too frequent confession. Just as communion can be received with spiritual harm without due preparation, similarly, confession can become mechanical, repetitive, petty and even lacking its basic requirement, repentance.

It must be stated clearly, of course, that there can be no condoning of communion undertaken lightly and without careful preparation. St Paul makes this very clear in writing to the Corinthians (I Cor.11:26-30).

Bearing in mind the quotation from Makarios of Corinth at the beginning, frequent communion is of itself spiritually desirable; that, generally, we attend the Liturgy in order to receive the Holy Gifts - not to do so would have seemed very perverse to the early Christians (presuming they were not penitents or catechumens). What is involved in preparation for communion is clearly defined in the Orthodox Tradition: self-examination and confession, fasting from all food from midnight and prayer. Prescribing what all these consist of is, however, another matter. Certainly, there should be confession but not necessarily before every communion. How frequently should be a matter between the individual and his/her spiritual father. Ideally, (and this is only my own view) all would benefit from confession three to four times a year (except in the case of falling into serious, deadly sins after which one should not receive until after absolution and reconciliation to the Church). A couple of years ago the Orthodox bishops of Britain issued a joint statement teaching the idea that the faithful, coming regularly to communion do not need absolution before every communion under normal circumstances. (2)

As to fasting, this is absolute from midnight for a morning communion and from midday if the Liturgy is in the evening. However, in consultation with ones priest, concession are obviously made for medical conditions such a diabetes.

Finally, the traditional Orthodox prayers and devotions read before communion have a

wonderful power when used with attention and compunction, to prepare the heart. They are usually to be found in any Orthodox prayer book and are lengthy. However, they can be read in stages, perhaps beginning from mid-week until Sunday. Some also add Compline with the Pre-Communion Canon on Saturday evening. And, indeed, alongside these we might also note that in many parishes, attendance at Vespers and Matins helps draw the worshipper into the meaning of each Sunday or feast that then culminates in the Divine Liturgy.

To summarise then, we should come to communion frequently, by which we mean weekly on the Lord's Day. Our preparation involves regular confession from time to time as well as both the fast beforehand and the preparatory prayers prior to each communion. This is the spiritual wisdom taught in the Orthodox Tradition. In my twenty years as a priest I have come across many different practices. There are those who come infrequently and when they do, they fast from meat for three days beforehand, for example. Or there are those who insist on confession before approaching the chalice. I have never had any desire to force people out of the religious practices in which they were raised and in which they feel comfortable. The only ones I have a duty to warn and call to change are the spiritually lazy and indifferent, whether they approach Holy Communion frequently or infrequently.

Yet none of this is a modern problem and there is nothing new under the sun. In the days of my patron saint, he found himself confronted by the same reluctance as the following quotation from a sermon of St. John Chrysostom makes clear:

Look, I entreat you: 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 you make no account of it? Or are you clean? Then fall down and partake. For everyone who does not partakes of the mysteries is standing here in shameless falsity. When you behold the curtain drawn, then imagine the heavens are let down from above, and that the angels are descending! ...

You have sung the hymns with the rest; you have declared yourself to be of the number of those who are worthy, by not departing with those who are unworthy... (3) Why stay and yet not partake of the table? I am unworthy you will say. Then are you 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... You are no more allowed to be here than the Catechumen is. For it is not at all the same thing never to have reached the mysteries, as it is when you have reached them, to stumble at them and despise them and to make yourself unworthy of this thing... So I may not then be the means of increasing your condemnation, I entreat you, not to forbear coming but to render yourself worthy both of being present and of approaching... And what then is our hope of salvation? We cannot lay the blame on our weakness; we cannot lay it on our nature. It is indolence and nothing else that renders us unworthy.

[Homily 3 on Ephesians]

Fr Chrysostom



**With
fear of
God and
faith and
love draw
near**

Notes:

(1) Though there be no clear evidence, it might be wondered whether this is why the use of the spoon for administering communion became our custom, being a convenient and practical way of giving small children and babies the Gifts. Then, in time, the practice became universal in Orthodox churches.

(2) The priest, of course, has the spiritual authority and indeed, a duty to refuse communion where appropriate. This is exercised not only in the case of heterodox Christians who might come to the chalice but also to the faithful who are for a time under penitence for their own spiritual good or whose way of life is not currently in accordance with Orthodoxy Christianity.

(3) At that period, enquirers, catechumens and penitents were sent out of the service, having heard the sermon and before the great entrance and the prayers of the faithful.

SERVICES

Vespers is normally served on Saturday's at 5.00pm in the Saints of Britain chapel. Fr. Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards.

January

Sun 3rd 31st after Pentecost
Sunday before Theophany Divine
Liturgy 10.30am

Tues 5th Eve of Theophany
Vespereal Liturgy of St Basil & Great
Blessing of Waters 7.00pm



Wed 6th Holy Theophany
Outdoor Blessing of Waters at
Bournemouth

Sun 10th 32nd after Pentecost
Sunday after Theophany Divine
Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 17th 33rd after Pentecost
Sunday of The Ten Lepers Divine
Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 24th 34th after Pentecost
Sunday after Theophany Sunday of
the Blind Man Divine Liturgy
10.30am

Sun 31st 35th after Pentecost
Sunday of Zaccheus
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

February

Tues 2nd The Meeting of Our Lord
in the Temple

Sun 7th 36th after Pentecost
Sunday of the Talents
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 14th 37th after Pentecost
Sunday of the Canaanite Woman
Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 21st Beginning of the Triodion
Sunday of the Publican & the
Pharisee Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 28th Sunday of the Prodigal
Son Divine Liturgy 10.30am