

## **On Frequent Holy Communion, Part One**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Until the 1970s, the Orthodox did not practice frequent Communion for many reasons, including the liturgical stagnation caused by a long history of continuous persecution. Education ceased and ignorance prevailed, so the prevailing concept was to limit participation in the holy things to a few times a year, such as great feasts. The believers were convinced that man is not worthy to partake of this fearful mystery.

There is no doubt that this conviction among the believers stemmed from their intense reverence for the divine mystery and the realization that they were sinners. The personal piety that the believers had in the last century or so contributed to their conviction that they were unworthy. This prompted the believers to prepare with utmost seriousness to participate in the Holy Sacrament. Since the believers cannot carry out such preparation continuously, they refrained from approaching the holy chalice, rather than approaching when they were not properly prepared.

Added to this is ignorance of the mystery of the Eucharist and its place in the life of the faithful and their spiritual journey, in addition to general ignorance about the church, the community of believers.

In the second half of the 20th century, the understanding of the Holy Eucharist started to deepen under the influence of education and preaching, especially from theologically educated clergy. We have now witnessed a more frequent participation in Holy Communion among believers. But we are also witnessing great complacency in preparing for the great mystery.

There is no doubt that moving the faithful from one practice to another required enormous efforts, but unfortunately, these efforts did not emphasize the importance of preparedness. The focus was placed on the sound ecclesiastical understanding of frequent communion without paying much attention to the importance of the personal preparation and the effort it deserves.

The new teaching gave all attention to the theological aspect of frequent Communion, citing its necessity, based on the theology of the Eucharist and the texts of the Divine Liturgy which declare that the sacrifice is offered for the sake of everyone present. Living a life of repentance was neglected, and now we see

crowds coming forward to receive Communion at every liturgy, even though the vast majority of them do not practice the sacrament of Confession at all, even once a year.

There is a necessary distinction between theoretical teaching and the practical methods to apply this teaching in the person's life. Having knowledge of something does not mean living it on an existential level. Knowing, for example, what the Bible says about forgiveness does not mean that I have practiced forgiveness. The same applies to all other virtues. I must then gradually train myself until I reach the level of Christian forgiveness.

Many of us have neglected or forgotten the importance of practical education. We say that we are children of God and that we are free in Christ, and this is a true gospel teaching. But the love of God that we are discussing did not lead us to act as children of God Almighty, as we exclude the fear of God from our hearts with no deterrent to sin that prevents it from taking hold of us. Therefore, today we are witnessing a decline in morals and the collapse of the home.

The Apostle Paul says: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways" (1 Cor. 13:11). Neglecting this basic verse in our churches has led us to superficial spirituality, to the point where we now know how to talk about virtue, but we are indifferent on how to practice it.

No one possesses virtues simply by knowing them theoretically. And practicing repentance is no exception to this rule. We must be vigilant to the importance of preparing our souls and bodies to fully participate in the Eucharist. This preparedness relates to each person's life of repentance. There is no set of rules in this regard that applies to all faithful everywhere, but it is rather related to the personal spiritual life of the believer. The mystery of repentance and confession plays a great role here.

The spiritual father of each believer determines when the spiritual child should or should not approach Communion. This spiritual father may sometimes resort to disciplining the believer by withholding the Eucharist for a period of time in order to raise the believer's spiritual awareness, help him to recognize his sins, and urge him to repent. The father confessor may prevent the believer because he is indifferent to his sin, he does not obey the gospel commandments, etc. Therefore,

there is no standard set of rules that applies to everyone. Rather, rules are exercised pastorally in the relationship between the spiritual father and the believer.

## **On Frequent Holy Communion, Part Two**

*By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)*

Today there is widespread misconception among believers between “being worthy” and “being ready” to receive Holy Communion. Whoever refrains from partaking of the chalice of Holy Communion due to unworthiness is confusing this with unreadiness. No human being is worthy of God dwelling in Him and uniting with Him. Who among us acquires perfect purity and who is among us is without sin? No human being is worthy of this great blessing. God dwells among us and in us because of His overwhelming mercy, His utmost love, and His condescension that is incomprehensible to the human mind. Therefore, there will never come a time when we will be worthy of the Eucharist. Rather, when we think that we have become worthy, we have fallen into the greatest sin, that is, into pride, the root of all evil.

Yet, we must prepare ourselves to receive the Lord. Just as a person prepares to welcome an important guest into his home by cleaning and arranging it, and then he dresses in clean and appropriate clothes, so the believer prepares to receive the Lord in the “house” of his or her soul. So, on the one hand, only a spirit of contrition and the conviction that I am a sinner and not worthy at all, relying on God’s vast mercy, can enable me to approach the chalice. On the other hand, I must seek to respond to God’s abundant mercy by committing myself to the appropriate preparation for Holy Communion that the Church has appointed in general, and the prayer rule which my spiritual father gives me personally, lest I become complacent and take the Lord’s mercy for granted, and then forget the importance of my role in my salvation. In short, we must realize that we are always unworthy, and yet must strive to partake worthily, through the necessary preparation.

Based on the teachings of the Gospel, the Church has established several means to help us prepare for Communion: the sacrament of Confession, the pre-Communion prayers, reconciliation with others, and correcting our bad habits, in addition to abstaining from food and drink from midnight before the Divine Liturgy and arriving on time to participate in the Divine Liturgy. Adherence to these instructions is essential and important in order to partake of the Holy Body and Blood of the Lord in a worthy manner, that is, with proper preparation. The Apostle Paul says: “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” (1 Cor 11:27). So, what should we do about this? The Apostle answers: “Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Cor 11:28).

We should not understand the relationship between the sacraments of Confession and the Eucharist in a mechanical or legalistic manner, but rather as something vitally and essentially connected. Some may argue that one should not partake of the Eucharist until after confession, but others disagree. To confess every time before receiving Communion is difficult to do, even in monasteries. However, it is absolutely unacceptable to receive Holy Communion constantly and not confess at all. The best practice is to both confess and receive Holy Communion according to the guidance of one’s spiritual father.

Let us not forget to examine our conscience thoroughly on the eve of the Divine Liturgy. This puts us on the right track, protects us from falling into a routine of approaching the chalice unprepared, and keeps the flame of longing for Christ burning within us. It is also a good practice to read the pre-Communion Canon and Prayers the night before the Divine Liturgy.

Proper preparation allows us to approach the divine mystery with contrition of heart and a conviction of our unworthiness, because we are sinners, and we must rely entirely on the mercy of the Lord, saying: “O Lord Master, I am not worthy that thou shouldest enter under the roof of the house of my soul; but as thou desirest, O Lover of mankind, to dwell in me, I make bold to draw near.” Let us draw near in the fear of God which keeps us in constant and fervent communion with Him. We should call to mind the pre-Communion admonition: “If thou desirest, O man, to eat the Body of the Master, approach in fear, lest thou be scorched, for it is fire. And, before drinking the divine Blood unto communion, first reconcile thyself to them that have wronged thee. Then dare to eat the mystical food.”