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In the past decades, a significant change has occurred among Orthodox Christians in America: they have begun to receive Holy Communion very frequently, even weekly. Prior to this, for at least the last few centuries, most Orthodox only communed a few times a year or less. This was an unfortunate decline from the ancient practice of the Church, and the move to more frequent reception of Holy Communion must be viewed as a positive one.

However, with this increase in frequency has occurred a decrease in reverence for the sacred Mystery, evidenced by a lack of preparation to receive Holy Communion -- or even the knowledge that they must do so -- among many Orthodox Christians. And since I have been asked several times in the past few months about the proper way to prepare for Holy Communion, I decided to dedicate this longer-than-usual "Bulletin Bit" to the topic.

Any reflection on this should begin with the words of the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth:

Therefore 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. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:27-32, NKJV)

The thing that is immediately apparent when we hear these words is that it is absolutely essential for us to prepare ourselves in order to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in a worthy manner. To come to Holy Communion without proper preparation is, to quote St Paul, "to eat and drink judgement" to ourselves. What a tragedy! The very Body and Blood of Christ which is broken and poured out for the life of the world and for our salvation becomes -- not salvation, but -- judgment to us if we do not approach Him in a worthy manner.

But what does this mean, in a worthy manner? St Paul tells us this as well: "let a man examine himself..." The word "examine" in this instance means to test or inspect something in order for it to be approved and found worthy. Many people say, "We are all sinful; how can we ever be worthy of the Body and Blood of Christ?" In one sense, of course, we cannot, and recognizing this is, paradoxically perhaps, the first step toward becoming worthy.

However, and this is important, simply recognizing that we are unworthy is not enough. Anyone can say, "I am a sinner; we are all sinners and, therefore, unworthy of Holy Communion." But St Paul does not leave it at that. He says that if we do not wish the communion in Christ's Body and Blood to be judgment to us then we must judge ourselves before receiving Holy Communion. To "judge ourselves" means that we anticipate the last judgment now, as a preparation for our encounter with Christ in Holy Communion. Certainly the last judgment will be an encounter with Christ, an encounter that will reveal the truth of who and what we are. What we must see is that Holy Communion is, likewise, an encounter with Christ,

and if we come to it without examining and judging ourselves then it will be judgment to us. This is the reason that making a good confession is considered necessary preparation to receiving Holy Communion, because to make a good confession is to judge ourselves.

Every examination and judgment, whether in confession, a classroom, or on an assembly line, requires a standard by which things are judged and found worthy. But the judge of all is Christ, not simply because He is the authority, but because He is the standard, the prototype of the new humanity (which is why St Paul calls Him the second and true Adam). To judge ourselves in the light of Christ, then, we must examine ourselves according to Christ's commandments (which is why we make Confession before the Gospel book). This is more than simply saying "I am a sinner", which takes very little examination. It means seeing our life, our thoughts, our actions, our words, our motives, and everything about ourselves in the light of Christ's teaching.

This assumes, of course, that we know Christ's teaching, and quite frankly this is a problem. If we do not read the scriptures, and particularly the Gospels, how can we judge ourselves in order to prepare to encounter Christ? What standard will we use? Sadly, for too many people Holy Confession deteriorates into self-analysis based on pop psychology rather than examination in the light of Christ and His teaching as an expression of the Divine Life.

Another aspect to approaching Holy Communion in a worthy manner is fasting. This has two elements to it. First, it involves keeping the fasts of the Church, whether they be the Wednesday and Friday fast each week or the lenten seasons of the year. If we do not observe the fasts then we approach the chalice unworthily.

Secondly, fasting prior to Holy Communion means that we abstain from food and drink prior to Holy Communion, eating and drinking nothing from at least midnight (traditionally Orthodox Christians abstain from marital relations the night before Communion as well). The fast that we keep when we go to sleep every night is broken at breakfast: "break fast." On days that we prepare to receive Holy Communion, however, we break our fast by receiving Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Generally excluded from this are the sick, the elderly, small children, and pregnant or nursing mothers. For the rest of us Holy Communion should be the very first thing that we eat and drink on the day of the Divine Liturgy.

Another aspect of approaching Holy Communion in a worthy manner is attending Vespers the evening prior to the Divine Liturgy. I realize, of course, that some people live too far away to attend Vespers one evening and then Liturgy the next day, or perhaps they work during the Vespers hour. As with fasting, there are always allowances made in cases of necessity. Those people living at a distance from the Temple or who have to work during that time can pray a shortened Vespers service in their icon corner at home. Many of the hymns for the Saturday Vespers are now available on the OCA website and they could be chanted or sung at home. But for the majority, attendance at Vespers is considered part of the proper preparation for Holy Communion.

Praying the "Prayers in Preparation for Holy Communion" found in the Orthodox Prayer Book is also part of the prayer rule for every Orthodox Christian, whether or not they are able to attend Vespers. These prayers can be said the night before, or the morning of, the Divine Liturgy.

Last but not least, an essential part of approaching the chalice worthily is that we do so without hatred or anger toward anyone. Our Lord tells us that if we approach the altar and then remember that our brother has something against us, we must first be reconciled to our brother and then return to the altar (Matt. 5:23-24).

In summary, then, the teaching of the Church on preparation for Holy Communion can be stated as follows (without including the exceptions which are stated above):

- * Regular Confession must be made, at a minimum of every three months (using the lenten seasons of the Church year can be a good guide).
- * One must observe the fast days and season of the Church, and abstain from food and drink from at least midnight the night before the Divine Liturgy.
- * An Orthodox Christian should attend Vespers the evening prior to the Divine Liturgy, and every Orthodox Christian should pray the “Prayers in Preparation for Holy Communion” from the Prayer Book.
- * An Orthodox Christian should be at peace with all persons, as much as it is within his or her power.

Some will be troubled by these rules because they appear to them to be legalistic. What we must understand is that legalism is not in the keeping of the rule of the Church, but in the motive for doing so. Our Lord’s condemnation of the Pharisees was not for fasting and praying and observation of the Law of God, but for their hypocrisy and the fact that their external actions did not conform to their inward spiritual condition. Our aim in properly preparing to receive the Sacred Mystery in Holy Communion is that we might, as St Paul instructs us, partake in a worthy manner, and that, through prayer, fasting, and repentance, the inside of the cup of our heart might conform to the outside (Matt. 23:25), and become a living chalice in which Christ our God dwells. To Him be all glory, with His Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.