

Holy Communion in the Orthodox Church

What is Holy Communion?

It is the sacrament of sacraments and the center of the Church's life. Everything in the life of the Church and of the Orthodox Christian leads to the Eucharist or Holy Communion and all things flow from it.

It's called the Eucharist meaning "thanks." We give thanks through this Heavenly Feast to Our Lord for everything that He has done in making, saving and glorifying the world.

The sacrament is also called Holy Communion since it is the mystical communion of people with God, with each other, and with everyone and everything through Christ.

Holy Communion is always given only to members of the Orthodox Church, including baptized infants. It's always given in both forms of bread and wine.

It is strictly understood as being the real presence of Christ, His true Body and Blood mystically present in the bread and wine.

At the Last Supper, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to His followers and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' And He took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you; for this is My blood of the new testament, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' (Matt. 26: 26 - 28; cf. Mark 14: 12 - 16; Luke 22: 7 - 13; 1 Cor. 11: 23 - 30).

What Does the Orthodox Church Mean By Communion: Sacramental Communion & Ecclesiological Communion?

Who can receive Holy Communion? Why Closed Communion?

What is Closed Communion?

Closed communion is the practice of restricting the serving of the elements of communion to those who are members of a particular church. This means that a church limits participation only to members of their own church.

It makes sense really that only full members of the Church, ie, those who are baptized and chrismated and who are in good standing with the Church, only receive Holy Communion. Otherwise why have baptism at all? Anyone can then come in and receive Communion. Communion then would be the "initiation rite," instead of baptism.

The Orthodox concept of "Communion" is totally holistic, and radically different from that of most other Christian groups. We do not separate the idea of "Holy Communion" from "Being in Communion," "Full Communion," and total "Communion in the Faith."

In the Orthodox Church therefore, to receive Holy Communion, or any other Sacrament (Mystery), is taken to be a declaration of total commitment to the Orthodox Faith. While we warmly welcome visitors to our Divine Services, it is understood that only those communicant members of the Orthodox Church who are prepared by confession and fasting will approach the Holy Mysteries.

This may seem unfair to someone who is a sincere, faithful, upright member of a non-Orthodox confession. They may feel that they are even being “judged.” In their own confession, “communion,” may be distributed freely, no questions asked, to all comers – sometimes even to those who are not of their confession.

This is because of the different understanding of the Orthodox Church and heterodox confessions of the concept and nature of the Church and also a different understanding of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

There must be unity of expression in worship, theology, obedience and morality. Those who do personally share Orthodox belief in the Eucharist are permitted to receive the sacrament in accordance with norms established by the Church.

To begin to understand how the Orthodox Church views Holy Communion, we must first set aside any notion that participation in the Holy Eucharist is a means for “inter-denominational” or “ecumenistic” communion and union. The Orthodox Church is not a denomination. It is the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. Holy Eucharist is the visible and tangible sign of true communion between the Lord and us, his servants, as well as between us and our fellow (Orthodox) brothers and sisters in Christ. This means that the vehicle for uniting separate groups (denominations) of Heterodox should never and can never be the Eucharist. The Eucharist, however, is the symbol that Orthodox Christians are united in their belief.

The Orthodox Church places great emphasis on the importance of unity in belief in Holy Communion being the actual Body and Blood.

According to Orthodox Christian Faith and worship, Holy Communion is not symbolic. It is real. Just as Jesus Christ is a real person in history and not a myth.

The Orthodox Church re-presents (presents again) the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ at every Divine Liturgy, otherwise known as (The Divine Service of the) Sacrament of Holy Communion.

After the consecration of the bread and wine in the Divine Liturgy, they are then called the Body and Blood of Christ.

Statements of faith are then made in the Divine Liturgy, taken from Scripture and other sources, stating that the Orthodox Church is the one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. It understands the Eucharist to be literally and actually the Body and Blood of Christ.

“Take, eat, this is my Body,” and, “Drink from this, all of you, this is my Blood. (Luke 22: 19, 20 & 1 Corinthians 11: 24, 25)” and, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. (John 6: 53)”

If Communion is literally the actual Body and Blood of Christ, it makes sense that it should be approached with a certain fear and trembling. And it makes sense that it should not be shared with someone who believes the sacrament to be only symbolic. If as we see in 1 Corinthians 11: 23 – 30 the fact that those who received Communion unworthily became sick and even died, is a strong indication that the consecrated bread and wine were more than merely symbolic.

Only by belonging to the Church, or in other words, being in communion with the very essence of Christ through the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, can one attain salvation for eternal life, thus we can answer the question, Who can be regarded as a member of the Church of Christ? by saying, All those who have been properly baptized in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the true Son of God come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3), and are united by the grace of the Sacraments in particular the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist administered by the Priesthood of Apostolic Succession.

An account of the Divine Liturgy and the Sacrament of Holy Communion from the 2nd Century Orthodox Church

By St Justin the Philosopher (AD 166)

No one may share the Eucharist with us unless they believe that what we teach is true, unless they are washed in the regenerating waters of Baptism for the remission of their sins, and unless they live in accordance with the principles given to us by Christ.

These powerful words were written over 1800 years ago. Today the Orthodox Church still makes the same statement: Holy Communion is reserved only for those who are baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christians. They must be in good standing and hold to the teachings and traditions of the Orthodox Church.

St. Ambrose of Milan (fourth century):

He gave [the Eucharist] to the Apostles to distribute to a believing people, and today He gives it to us, for He, as a priest, daily consecrates it with His own words. Therefore, this bread has become the food of the saints. —*On the Patriarchs* 9, 38

As the late-first century document the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, says:

Let no one eat or drink from your Eucharist except those who are baptized in the Lord's Name; for concerning this also the Lord hath said: 'Give not that which is holy to the dogs.'

This reality can raise questions concerning those who are baptized in non-Orthodox traditions, At the end of the day, the Orthodox Church maintains that there are no sacraments outside of the Church, and so the first step towards receiving holy communion is being baptized into the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

Christ desires all to draw near and receive of His holy and life-creating mysteries. But let us not be deceived by an erroneous, yet popular, belief in the sovereignty of the individual. Grace is freely-given, not demanded and seized.

It wasn't up to the individual to demand that the sacred Body and Blood were due to him, rather it was (and is) the responsibility of the priest to guard the sacred mysteries of Christ on behalf of the entire Church.

This wasn't solely because participation in the Eucharist is a visible declaration of the unity of—and true participation in—Christ and his Body (making it an impossibility for those outside His Body to be 'in communion'), but also out of love for both the non-Orthodox and the unprepared. For such, partaking of the Eucharist would be "eating and drinking damnation" ([1 Cor. 11:29](#)), and so the ministers of the sacraments blithely distributing it to any who ask for it would be both irresponsible and unloving.

This was the consistent belief and practice of all Christianity up to, and even including, the Reformers. Article XXIV of the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession* states that "Chrysostom reports how the priest stood every day, inviting some to Communion and forbidding others to approach," as a justification

of the continued practice of 'closed communion.' This remained the norm in Protestant denominations until the last century.

Why do we have Holy Communion?

Because Christ taught us and told us to receive His Body & Blood so we may have life. Christ Himself said, "Do this in memory of Me." Theosis.

Just after the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, people were following Jesus everywhere and always looking for Him.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I tell you; you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were satisfied. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which remains to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For the Father has sealed Him!" As a result, they asked Him, "What must we do, that we may accomplish the works of God?" Jesus replied, "This is the work of God, that you believe in the One whom He has sent!" So they replied, "What then do You do for a sign, so that we may see and believe You? What work do You accomplish? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness! As it is written, 'He gave them bread out of Heaven to eat.'" Jesus therefore said to them, "Truly, truly, I tell you; it was not Moses who gave you the bread out of Heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread out of Heaven. For the bread of God is what comes down out of Heaven, and it gives life to the world."

Then they said to Him, "Lord, always give us this bread!" Jesus told them, "I am the bread of life! The one who comes to Me will not be hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty. But I told you that you have seen Me, and yet, you do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who is coming to Me I will in no way reject. For I have come down from Heaven, not to do My own will, but to do the will of the one who sent Me. This is the will of My Father who sent Me: that of all He has given Me, I should lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. And this is the will of the One who sent Me: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life; and this one I will raise up on the last day."

At this, the Jews began to murmur concerning Him, because He had said, "I am the bread which came down out of Heaven." They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How then does He say, 'I have come down out of Heaven?'" Therefore, Jesus answered them, "Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws Him, and this one I will raise up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' Therefore, everyone who hears from the Father and has learned comes to Me. Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God. He has seen the Father! Truly, truly, I tell you; the one who believes in Me has eternal life. I am the bread of life! Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down out of Heaven. Its purpose is that anyone may eat of it and not die. I

am the living bread which came down out of Heaven. Anyone who eats of this bread will live forever! Yes, the bread which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.”

At this, the Jews disputed with one another, saying, “How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?” Jesus therefore said to them, “Truly, truly, I tell you; unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you do not have life in yourselves. The one who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For truly My flesh is food, and My blood is truly drink. The one who eats My flesh and drinks My blood dwells in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and as I live because of the Father, whoever eats Me will also live because of Me. This is the bread which came down out of Heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate the manna and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever!” He said these things in the synagogue, as He taught in Capernaum.

Therefore, many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying! Who can listen to it?” But knowing in Himself that His disciples grumbled at this, Jesus said to them, “Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you would see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? It is the spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray Him. He said, “For this reason, I have told you that no one can come to Me, unless it is given to him by My Father.” At this, many of His followers left and no longer walked with Him. Then Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you also want to leave?” Then Simon Peter answered Him, “Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life! We have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” John 6: 26 – 69

So this is why we receive Communion. To have life. To be united to Christ and in Christ and with each other. For salvation and eternal life.

St Paul says, the goal of every Christian is to grow up in every way into Him Who is the head, into Christ, from Whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied... makes bodily growth and builds itself up in love (Eph 4: 15 - 16). This is so since Christ is the head of the Church, His body, and is Himself its Savior (Eph 5: 23). We become part of the Mystical Body of Christ by our communion of the Holy Eucharist. As St Paul says: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor 10: 16 - 17).

How Do We Prepare to Receive Holy Communion?

Holy Communion is an occasion which demands of us a certain level of preparation. While it is true we are all sinners and will always remain sinners in this life, that does not

excuse us from our responsibilities to prepare ourselves, to the best of our ability, to be clean before the face of God.

This preparation can include Confession, Prayer, Fasting and other acts of purification and charity.

Is Confession a prerequisite for Communion?

Weepers, Hearers, Co-Standers, Communicants

Fasting & Communion

So that your prayers may have power and be answered

Not what goes in your mouth (Matthew 15: 11 – 20)

In the works of St Basil the Great and other Fathers we see that there were four stages of Christians. The first were the Weepers, who sat outside the temple and asked forgiveness from the Christians who were entering. Second were the Hearers, who waited until the readings of the Divine Liturgy and then exited with the catechumens. Third were the Co-Standers, who remained within the temple until the end of the Divine Liturgy without receiving Communion. The fourth were those who communed of the Immaculate Mysteries. So, when someone committed a sin, they had to go through a period of repentance, and repentance meant for a person to pass through purification to the illumination of the nous, to change their darkened nous and make it bright. Afterwards the Bishop reads a prayer and the person could commune.

How Often Do We Receive/Should We Receive Holy Communion?

Worthiness & Readiness

How Do We Receive Holy Communion?

Concerning the Communion itself, in the Orthodox Church both laity and clergy always receive Communion of both the Body and Blood of Christ. The Communion is given to the laity in a spoon containing a small piece of the Holy Bread together with a portion of the wine, and it is received standing. A strict fast is observed, usually from the night before, and nothing can be eaten or drunk after waking in the morning before Communion. As a theologian of the Church has well put it, “You know that those who invite the Emperor to their house, first clean their home. So you, if you want to bring God into your bodily home for the illumination of your life, you must first sanctify your body by fasting [Gennadius, Hundred Chapters].”

Let all things be done decently and in order – St Paul (1 Cor 14: 40)

Antidoron

After the final blessing of the Liturgy, the faithful come up to kiss the Hand Cross held by the Priest and those who have not communed receive a small piece of bread, called the Antidoron, which, although blessed, was not consecrated, having been taken from the same bread(s) from which the Lamb was taken in the Proskomedia. This bread is given out as an expression of Christian fellowship and love (agape).

What should our attitude be towards Holy Communion?

St John the Golden-Mouth gives this guidance for us:

When you see the Lord sacrificed and lying before you, and the High Priest standing over the sacrifice and praying, and all who partake being marked with that precious blood, can you think that you are still among men and still standing on earth? Are you not at once transported to Heaven, and, having driven out of your soul every carnal thought, do you not with naked soul and pure mind look round upon heavenly things? Oh, the wonder of it! Oh, the loving-kindness of God to men! He who sits above with the Father... gives Himself to those who wish to clasp and embrace Him – which they do, all of them, with their eyes. Do you think this could be despised? Or that it is the kind of thing anyone can be superior about? (On the Priesthood pp70 – 71)

The Divine Liturgy or the Sacrament of Holy Communion (it's the same thing), actually unites the heavenly realm with the earthly. The Angels and Saints are present, as witnessed by hundreds of written accounts from Saints and holy people throughout the centuries. We are brought into the presence of the King of Kings, and He condescends out of inexpressible love, to allow us to partake in a mystical, yet very real, way of His Body and Blood.