

Preparing for Holy Communion

“But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat and drink of the bread and of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgement to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number are dying” (I Cor.11:28-30).

It occurred to me recently as I went over with the newly baptized members how they should prepare to receive Holy Communion that this would be a good review for everyone from time to time.

I am including in this leaflet the things that His Grace Bishop JOSEPH taught us years ago as well as, I hope, some helpful notes to clarify.

To receive Holy Communion is a wonderful privilege that makes us “partakers of the Divine Nature” (2 Peter 1:4). It is never just a religious ritual. It is always a matter of life and death, quite literally, as St. Paul points out to the Corinthians. Life to those who partake in faith; weakness, sickness and death to those who partake unworthily (see I Cor. 11:30).

Of course the only way that we can partake “worthily” is to acknowledge that we are absolutely unworthy. How do we keep that in mind and prepare to receive this most wonderful aide to our salvation?

In preparing to receive Holy Communion we are preparing the house of our soul to receive the Theanthropos, the God/Man, the Incarnate Son of God into our very bodies and souls. Practically

speaking, how do we prepare our dwelling for that Divine Visitation?

1. We confess often if we are to receive often.

It has been suggested that one should go to confession every 4 to 6 weeks and to refrain from communion after that until it gets done. Our Church requires that we confess at least once a year, during Great Lent. That direction is especially for those who only receive Communion during Great Lent or at Pascha!

You should consult your confessor and follow a rule that is suitable for you.

2. We keep the fasts of Wednesday and Friday each week.

This includes certain types of foods as well as sexual intimacy.

The fast of Wednesday and Friday are not optional efforts. On Wednesday we remember the betrayal of Christ. On Friday we remember his crucifixion, death and burial for our sakes.

This is a required effort to tame the demands of the body so that, receiving grace in that ascetic struggle, we can begin to overcome the other passions as well.

Whoever is faithful “in the few things (the little matters) I will make to be ruler of many things” (Matt. 25:21). This is “the few things” that the Lord spoke of. It is in our power to do. We gain the strength of grace to overcome the passions (the many things) through such a do-able (a small) obedience as fasting.

Generally speaking, if one cannot keep the weekly fast he should refrain from Communion that Sunday and renew his effort the following week.

You should consult your confessor should exceptional circumstances arise.

3. On the eve before Holy Communion, at least from midnight (12:00am) there is a total fast from food and drink until receiving communion. **

On days when there is a Vespers Liturgy not served in the morning food should not be taken 6 to 8 hours before and drink 4 to 6 hours before Holy Communion.

Those with special health needs, the very young, the very old, pregnant and nursing mothers should follow the advice of their confessor in regard to these things.

A. In our time it is important to note that the day before Holy Communion is a day of sexual abstinence. In fact the Holy Fathers often state that if 3 days of abstinence were required for the Jews just to hear God at Mt. Sinai then should Christians not refrain for at least 3 days before actually receiving God into their bodies!?

Fasting includes the practice of disciplining ourselves in the indulgence of food and intimacy. These are not evil things. They are very good things. They are meant to generate and nourish life. If they were not pleasurable neither of these essential things would be accomplished. We are called to rise above the pleasure of these normal things in preparation to receive the Heavenly

Bread.

B. It should be noted for your information that in the book of the Holy Canons St. Nikodemos states the common practice of the Church is for the day before Holy Communion to be a lenten day regarding food as well. This is often not practiced in our churches in our day, though you will find it still in the books and throughout the world especially in monasticism.

For some people that means the whole day might be lenten food with the common mitigation of wine and oil and more meals on Saturdays and/or Sundays with a strictly lenten evening meal. For others it might mean at least the evening meal would be lenten.

One should follow the advice of their confessor in this regard.

4. The evening before Holy Communion one should attend the Vespers service for the feast.

The evening service begins the celebration of the new day. Great Vespers is always served on Saturday evening. Vespers, Great Vespers or Vigil are served before other feast days. If you cannot attend Vespers the service may be read at home or in your car. The Holy Transfiguration prayer book is a very good source for the Vespers service at home.

One should follow the advice of their confessor in regard to special circumstances.

It should also be said that everyone is encouraged to attend the Orthros service before communion as often as possible.

5. The evening before Holy Communion one should read the “Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion”.

This canon can be found in most prayer books and will be available in booklet form in the Free Literature Rack in the fellowship hall. The best and most complete source for this service is found in the small blue Holy Transfiguration prayer book available in our bookstore.

Though this canon may be read by itself, it is normally read together with Little Compline after Vespers. On Saturday evenings in our parish it is usually read in the temple after Great Vespers. Anyone that wishes may stay and participate.

In practice this canon may be read with attention as time may allow the day before.

6. On the morning of Holy Communion one should read the “Prayers of Preparation to Receive Holy Communion” upon arising from sleep.

These prayers are in most prayer books. The best and most complete source for this service is found in the small blue Holy Transfiguration prayer book available in our bookstore.

Again, in practice these prayers may be read with attention as time may allow the day before.

We could write a book about preparing to worthily receive Holy Communion. In fact the Saints have written books on the subject, some of which are finally being translated into English for our sakes.

These guidelines are not imposed on us just for the sake of having rules. As with everything that guides our spiritual lives these guides are given that our attention (our nous) might be fastened on the “One thing needful”, the acquisition of the grace of the Most Holy Spirit, that is so richly abundant in the Holy Mysteries. They are meant to impress on us the importance of our communing and to prepare our souls as good ground to receive the seed of grace for eternal life.

These guidelines are meant for a blessing and to avoid the curse of negligently participating in holy things. Negligence hardens our hearts in sinful dispositions and drives grace away (Heb.2:3). May we always, and me a sinful priest first of all, draw near “in the fear of God, with faith and love.”