



GREEK ORTHODOX METROPOLIS ^{OF} ATLANTA

ΙΕΡΑ ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΛΙΣ ΑΤΛΑΝΤΑΣ

“The work of the Sacrament of the Divine Eucharist is the change of the offered gifts into the Body and Blood of Christ. The purpose is the sanctification of the faithful, who, by partaking of these gifts, receive forgiveness of sins and the inheritance of the kingdom of the heavens.”

(St. Nicholas Cabasilas 14th century)

The Sacrament of the Divine Liturgy was instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, at the Mystical Supper, the night before His Passion (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, 1 Corinthians 11). After He gave Communion to His disciples, He instructed them to do the same in His remembrance (Luke 22:19). Therefore, the Divine Liturgy constitutes the core of our Christian Faith. Two millennia of Church History have taught us that the constant celebration of the Divine Liturgy sustained Church communities in times of need and persecution, when Churches were deprived of all their other ministries. As a matter of fact, all the rest of the ministries of the Church acquire their primary meaning and purpose through the Holy Eucharist. This is what the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church has been doing since the Apostolic era, this is what the Eastern Orthodox Church continues to practice presently.

One might ask why the Sacrament of the Divine Liturgy is more important than the other sacraments or services. The answer is simple: because through the Sacrament of the Divine Liturgy, Christ appears bodily among the congregation of the faithful, who celebrates the sacrament. The Lord Himself ensured us: ***“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them”*** (Matthew 18:20). In the Orthodox Church we have not only the faith that Christ is in our midst whenever we gather in His name, but also the experience of His presence. Numerous signs and miracles in the life of the Church testify to this fact. Moreover, every time the Divine Liturgy is celebrated, Christ is in the midst of our congregation not only spiritually but physically, with His Body and Blood. Furthermore, through His infinite love for humanity, we are deemed worthy to partake of the sacred gifts and unite ourselves with Him. This is the only true union between the human person and God, which is made possible, by God’s mercy, *“not because of our own righteousness, for we have done nothing good on earth”* (St. Basil’s Liturgy, from the prayer before the consecration). Hence, explaining this in simpler terms, every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy we ask Christ to descend from heaven and to be with us, physically, through His Body and Blood. Christ, whose love for us is beyond measure, comes down and allows us, regardless of our unworthiness, to partake of His Body and Blood and thus to commune with His Divine Grace that cleanses and purifies us from all iniquities.

The Holy Fathers of our Church have repeatedly highlighted how essential it is for the life of the Church to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and to receive Holy Communion. St. Ignatius of Antioch (late 1st-early 2nd century) describes the Eucharist as *“the medicine of immortality, the antidote we take in order not to die but to live forever in Jesus Christ”* (St. Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians 20:2). St. Augustine (mid-4th-early 5th century) in his renowned sermon on the Eucharist explains that the assembly of the faithful becomes One Body and constitutes the

Church by partaking of One Bread and One Cup, that is to say the Body and Blood of Christ. St. Cyprian of Carthage (3rd century) instructs the faithful that the Holy Consecrated Gifts should only be given to those who are baptized Christians and have properly prepared to receive them: *“The bread of life is Christ; now, this is not everyone's bread, but it is ours. We call this 'our bread' because Christ is the bread of those who partake of His body. And we ask that this bread be given to us daily, lest we, who live in Christ and receive the Eucharist every day as the food of salvation, be separated from His body by some grave sin that keeps us from communion and so deprives us of our heavenly bread”* (St. Cyprian of Carthage On The Lord's Prayer).

Understanding that Holy Communion is the Bread of Life, it is important that we should not receive this antidote lightly but make serious preparations to partake of the Gifts of the Heavenly Banquet to which we have been graciously invited. St. Nicholas Cabasilas, in order to educate the faithful for the need of preparation, uses the Parable of the Sower by emphasizing that the Lord sows the seeds like a farmer but it is our responsibility to prepare the soil before receiving the seed and allowing it grow. This kind of preparation belongs to each and every one of us individually.

The Church in order to help us prepare properly for receiving Holy Communion has set some instructions that we should follow: Thus, the preparation begins with strict fasting (Canon 29 of Quinisext, Canon 41 of Carthage) from the beginning of the day (midnight) which means no breakfast, no coffee, drink, water, etc. until the time we receive Holy Communion.

Along with this physical preparation, our Holy Orthodox Church tries to help the faithful by offering some prayers that help us examine our unworthiness and asks God to show mercy on us as we prepare to approach the Holy Chalice. These are the prayers contained in the service of the Preparation for Holy Communion. Additionally, our Church has offered to us the sacrament of Holy Confession. This Sacrament—like all the other sacraments—was instituted by our Lord, when He told His disciples: *“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained”* (John 20:23). Consequently, the Church urges the faithful to go to confession regularly, according to the spiritual needs of each individual and with the advice of their spiritual father. The Sacrament of Confession grants forgiveness of sins, it also provides the one who confesses with precious guidance by the spiritual father and finally it grants the grace to *“sin no more”* (John 8:11). Therefore, providing the penitent with the grace to cut off the bonds of the confessed sins and not to repeat them. St. Paul emphasizes the importance of preparation before receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he provides an austere warning for those who are receiving, without the proper reverence (1 Corinthians 11:27-32).

Having completed the preparation, according to the best of their abilities, here are practical guidelines that everyone must follow as they approach to receive from the Holy Chalice:

- As the priest calls the faithful to draw near with *“the fear of God, faith and love,”* meaning first we should approach with great reverence. As we line up to receive, we should refrain from socializing, looking around, or engaging any other behavior that might distract us. Nevertheless, the fear and faith that we have in our hearts for God,

should not be on public display but remain in our hearts. Therefore, the faithful should refrain from small or big prostrations before the chalice. Instead, we should listen to the Lord's words: *"go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly"*(Matthew 6:6).

- Together with fear and faith, we are called to draw near "with love", which means both love for God and for our neighbor. Therefore, as we draw near to the Divine Nourishment it is critical to abstain from any form of judgement against our fellow Christians or visitors that might be attending the Divine Liturgy. Regarding the directions for approaching the Holy Chalice the faithful with the same love of God for His Holy House, should follow the directions offered by the clergy and/or the parish council members. All the more, during this perilous period of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to adhere the rules of social distancing, along with all the other guidelines, as directed by the CDC and the government.
- When the faithful approach the Holy Chalice, they should stand with respect before the priest and say their baptismal/chrismation name. After the name is uttered, the faithful should open their mouth to receive Holy Communion. When the spoon goes into the mouth, the faithful should close their mouth and make sure that they swallow the consecrated Bread and Wine. Every person who stands before the Holy Chalice, should not have any contact with the red communion cloth, before, during or after receiving Holy Communion. The red communion cloth is to be placed under each person's chin by those who are assisting the clergy. Under no circumstances should the red communion cloth be used as a table napkin to wipe the mouth, nor should one who has received Holy Communion touch it at all.
- Finally, after receiving, the faithful should return to their pew, without delaying the line by crossing themselves or making prostrations. As it has been mentioned above, such forms of piety are not for public display. It should also be noted here, that in the Greek Orthodox Tradition, it is not customary to venerate the Chalice after receiving from it, for theological as well as for practical reasons. The theological reason is self-explanatory; God has deemed us worthy to receive from His Body and Blood, and this is the greatest blessing one can receive. Consequently, there is no need to venerate the Chalice expecting some extra blessing. From a practical point of view, the faithful should not try to venerate the Chalice, while the priest is holding it, because that may cause the priest to accidentally spill the Holy Communion.
- Having returned to the pew, the faithful should not be distracted by discussions, but focus on the Thanksgiving Communion Prayers. When the priest finishes with the distribution of Holy Communion, then the faithful, all together should follow the dismissal prayers of the Divine Liturgy as well as any other prayers that they need to participate in collectively, such as the memorial services, artoklasia or other blessings, etc.

In conclusion, we need to note that the Church adopted the word “Liturgy” (Λειτουργία) from Ancient Athenian Democracy. For the Athenians of the 5th century BC the word “Liturgy” meant both “the work of the people” as well as “the work for the people.” As mentioned above, the Divine Liturgy constitutes the most essential and most significant work of the faithful, Both the clergy and the people. It is the work of the people, prayed by the assembly of the faithful, who by partaking of the Holy Gifts encounter the physical presence of Christ among their congregation. This encounter transforms the assembly of the faithful into the Mystical Body of Christ and grants forgiveness of sins and spiritual enhancement to the participants. In other words, the faithful people are the ones who benefit from the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. This is how the “work of the people” becomes “the work for the people.”

Let us all, my brothers and sisters in Christ, give our best effort to be good stewards of God, by listening and following the wise exhortation of St. Ignatius of Antioch: *“make every effort to come together more frequently to give thanks and glory to God. For when you meet together frequently, the powers of Satan are overthrown and his destructiveness is nullified by the unanimity of your faith. There is nothing better than peace, by which all warfare among those in heaven and those on earth is abolished”* (St. Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians 13:1-2).