

Communion and Intercommunion

Priests are occasionally asked "Father, my friend (or relative) isn't Orthodox, but they would like to receive Holy Communion in our Church. Are they allowed? Conversely, it often happens that our faithful who attend weddings or funerals in churches of other denominations, or are in hospitals or nursing homes, are offered Holy Communion by the clergy or Eucharistic ministers of another Christian denomination (this is especially true of the Catholics). The priest often finds out about this afterwards, when during conversation the faithful involved say "and by the way, father, I was given communion by a Catholic - is it all right?"

Simply saying "no" to either question often makes the priest appear to be "intolerant" or uncharitable. But the fact of the matter is that we should not commune in other churches, nor is it permitted to commune non-Orthodox in our Church. Why?

In order to understand who may and who may not approach for the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist we must first of all understand what the Eucharist is. We know that the Church has always believed and taught that the consecrated bread and wine become truly the Most Holy Body and Blood of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. This Eucharist is present with us, but it is also a "remembrance" of the past (the Mystical Supper, our Lord's sacrifice on Golgotha), and somehow also it exists above all time - eternally. It is at the same time worldly and heavenly - temporal and eternal. It is not a symbol of our Lord, it is our Lord; It is not only a symbol of a historical act, it is God in heaven present among and within us.

The Eucharist, also known from Apostolic times as the "breaking of the bread", has been the defining act of every Christian in every age. As Jesus said, "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (Jn. 6:54). Even though the vast majority of Orthodox Christians do not commune at every Liturgy, we still serve the Liturgy on all Sundays and Holy days. Why serve a Liturgy, and not a moleben' (after all, wouldn't it be shorter)? We do this because the Liturgy - the Eucharist - is that which constitutes the Church. As the Christians martyred in 303 A.D. in Abilinitina, North Africa explained when asked by their tormenters why they continued to attend Sunday Liturgy knowing full well that the authorities were waiting to arrest them, "without

the Sunday Eucharist we do not exist”.

Likewise, as we know, the Eucharist is the “mystery of faith” *par excellence*. In every other Holy Mystery the properties of the physical manifestation of the mystery remain the same - blessed water or oil is blessed, but it’s still water or oil. In the Eucharist we are faced with the fact that the bread and the wine are changed into God’s Body and Blood. We can only understand this through the eyes of faith, and historically it has been only those who hold the faith of the Church who are permitted to partake of the Holy Mysteries, especially of the Eucharist.

Simply put, it is holding the Apostolic Orthodox Christian Faith and membership in the Church which have always been the requirements for receiving Holy Communion. Likewise, when one of the faithful transgressed God’s law (by committing a grave sin such as murder, adultery, preaching heresy, or denying the faith) the gravest consequence has always been excommunication - which literally means the denial of Holy Communion. If anyone is not a member in good standing of the Church (spiritually and morally) or does not hold the Orthodox Faith they are not permitted to approach the chalice.

So we see that the Holy Mystery of the Eucharist has, like the Holy Cross, both a vertical and a horizontal dimension - vertically, it is our union with God, and horizontally, it is our union with the Church (both now and throughout all ages). Those who do not hold the True Faith with regards to the Eucharist (the protestant denominations for example, who teach that the bread and wine only symbolize Christ’s body and blood, and therefore cannot be understood as uniting us to God) are not permitted to approach because their faith is lacking, and those who are not united to the Orthodox Church (the Catholics, for example, who still acknowledge that the Eucharist is truly Jesus’ Body and Blood) are forbidden because we do not have unity with them in the Body of Christ, the Church.

Lest anyone think that the Orthodox Church is “intolerant” or “judgmental” towards others in this matter, it must be underlined that not every Orthodox Christian is permitted to approach the Holy Chalice. Orthodox who have committed grave sins (murder, sex outside of the marriage bond, apostasy from the faith, etc.), and those who have broken the

discipline of the Church (by contracting a marriage outside of the Church, for example) are forbidden to approach for Holy Communion until such time as they have truly repented of their sin, approached for Holy Confession, and done what is necessary or possible to right the wrong they have committed. Why is this so? Because the Eucharist is the Most Holy Mystery, it is Christ Himself, and we dare not adopt a lighthearted attitude towards it. Remember that the first thing the priest or deacon says when calling us to the Cup is "With fear of God . . ."

So in answering this question of whether non-Orthodox are permitted to Holy Communion it's important to remember that the opportunity to approach for the Eucharist is a privilege, not a right. This applies to Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox, and is based on our Faith, Church membership and Christian life. Likewise, the fact that non-Orthodox are not permitted to the Cup is in no way to be construed as a judgement of their souls - the only ones we should ever be judging are ourselves, and our own sins. But the fact is that there has never been communion in the Holy Mysteries where communion in the same faith did not exist first, not for the Apostles, not for the Saints, and not for us. And understanding this, for all of us who truly desire that denominationalism and sectarianism within Christianity will cease and we will truly have the "One Church" which Our Lord desires, the words which we pray at every Liturgy take on added meaning - "having asked for unity of the Faith, and communion in the Holy Spirit, let us commend ourselves, and one another, and our whole life unto Christ our Lord".

Fr. Bohdan Hladio, July, 1998