

## You, Your Children and Holy Communion

One of the duties given to a priest at his ordination is to become the guardian of the chalice. According to the rules governing our own Antiochian Patriarchate, in administering the Holy Gifts at communion, the priest should be assured (as far as possible) that the person receiving holy communion is either: a) An Orthodox Christian in full communion with the priest's own patriarchate and that the person is not under any sort of ban or, to the priest's knowledge, has not fallen into serious sin; b) a lay-Orthodox Christian from a patriarchate, currently in dispute with the priest's own patriarchate (as currently between Antioch and Jerusalem); c) a lay-Christian from one of the oriental Orthodox churches, unable to attend their own church; d) with the dispensation of both the relevant Orthodox and Roman Catholic bishops, a lay-Roman Catholic unable to get to their own Church. Further to this, Holy Communion may not be given to those from the Protestant and others who have emerged since the Reformation.

Generally, it can be seen that the Orthodox Church does not practice 'open communion,' as in many of the Protestant churches. This is not because we wish to appear exclusive and seek to deny grace to those who do not belong to us. Primarily, we guard the chalice for two clear reasons that have stood the test of time and we are not going to change our practice.

Firstly, to receive communion you have to be 'in communion.' This implies a common faith and is one of the reasons that the Nicene Creed was introduced to the Liturgy. There are clear lines of demarcation between Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy, to the point where we vehemently contradict ideas they hold dear. In other words, for a heterodox believer to seek communion from us would be to live a lie. And to assert that such things do not really matter is a failure to comprehend what communion is for the Orthodox. To use a term borrowed from mathematics, for us there is no lowest common denominator when it comes to the Christian faith, as so often proclaimed by the Ecumenical Movement. For us, there is only the fullness of Orthodoxy, the Holy Tradition, as received through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and teachings of the Apostles and fathers, Councils, Canons and Creed.

Secondly, the guarded nature of communion is observed for protection where it might prove blasphemous or spiritually or even physically harmful to the would-be communicant. To attempt such would be to compound their sin even further and would entail the wrath of God, not His grace, as Paul noted among the Corinthians (1 Cor.11:27-32).

Further to this, of course, there is the fast we practice before receiving the Holy Gifts; there should be proper spiritual preparation and prayer (this can be found in our Orthodox books of personal prayer); we should go to Confession from time to time and certainly if we have fallen into serious sin.

For most of us, therefore, under normal circumstances, Holy Communion should be a frequent and regular part of our belonging to the Church. It is perfectly proper to seek weekly communion, as taught by so many of the great spiritual writers of our Church such as, St John Chrysostom, St Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and St John of Kronstadt. Children baptized into the Orthodox Church, under the age of about seven, may of course receive communion freely and we can introduce them to the communion fast gradually, as practical.

However, there is one matter which must be condemned as very dubious practice, not only with our children but sometimes among adults. That is, the way that some bring their little ones to the chalice, having arrived in church a few minutes before communion.

Some have even asked for communion for their children after the service has ended. In both cases, parents should not be surprised when communion is refused. Holy Communion is not magic, it is not a kind of inoculation against misfortune. Communion is the culmination of a liturgical act, both the means and expression of our belonging to Christ and should not be divorced from that context. Even the bringing of Communion to the sick or housebound outside the service is a celebration of the same mystery by extension. For those who are able to get to the service they should be there, participating in the whole Divine Liturgy from the beginning and especially so if they intend to receive the Holy Gifts.

This is not a question of denying the 'full wage' to those who, as in the parable, came at the eleventh hour. That would be grossly to misunderstand the purpose of the parable (Matt.20:1-15). It is important, therefore, that if anyone has a real problem in attending the Liturgy from 10.30am they should consult one of the clergy for advice. Similarly, it is always proper practice, if you are new to our congregation or attending any other Orthodox church for the first time, to inform the priest and ask a blessing if you wish to receive communion.

There is an obvious reason why your children should be in church for the whole service and that is, to be trained and taught and absorb Orthodox practice as early as possible. We do have a Sunday school now where the little ones can be taught at their own level and we hope soon to extend such catechetical teaching and formation to older children and young adults. If you bring a child, seeking communion only at the end of the service, you must ask yourself what effect is this having on your child; what are you silently teaching it?

In some congregations you could, as an outside observer, imagine that communion is only something that children do. This brings us to final point. There are a number of adults who come either regularly or from time to time to the Liturgy and they never approach the chalice. Why? Well, they must ask and answer that question themselves.

Fr Chrysostom