

HOW OFTEN SHOULD WE RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION?

It is often asked, “Should we receive Holy Communion every Sunday?” Some of us were raised to believe that we should receive Holy Communion just a few times a year, like on Easter and Christmas. Others, that we should receive Holy Communion every time we attend Divine Liturgy. So, who is correct?

Commented [FM1]:

It is the case that for every communion we should prepare, above all by abiding by the words pronounced before Holy Communion is presented to the people, “With the fear of God, with faith and with love, draw near.” Do we have fear of God, that is, do we know that our salvation is always at stake. If we have sinned, are we prepared if we have not confessed our sin? With faith—do we believe in the actual presence of the body and blood of Christ, that this is not a mere symbol; mere bread and wine; but His very body and blood offered for the forgiveness of sins and for our salvation? Do we love one another? If we have a grudge or sin against another person, have we reconciled with that person?

We also prepare by fasting and prayer. If we pray in earnest for our souls, we approach with humility before the Lord’s Table. If we fast on the appointed fast days of the Church, to include every Wednesday and Friday, and the other Lenten periods? If so, we are prepared to approach the chalice. If not, have we dedicated a fast of at least three days prior to receiving to properly prepare? This does not make us worthy, but prepared. It keeps us from approaching in a haphazard or casual manner.

Macarius Notaras*, a renowned Orthodox saint and teacher, said this:

“To receive Communion the usual two or three times a year is good and helpful, but to receive Communion more frequently is far better. Remember, the nearer a person comes to the light, the more light he gets. The closer he draws to the fire, the warmer he is. The nearer he approaches sanctity, the more saintly he becomes.

“In the same way, the more often one draws near to God in Communion, the more one receives light and warmth and holiness. My friend, if you are worthy to make your Communion two or three times a year, you are worthy of making it more often, as St. John Chrysostom tells us, by maintaining your own earlier preparation and worthiness. But what does stop us from taking Communion? The answer is our carelessness and laziness, and we give way to these faults so much that we are not sufficiently prepared to be able to receive Communion.

“There is another way of looking at this problem, too. People like this do not, in fact, obey God’s commandment as they imagine they do. Where did God, or any one of the saints for that matter, bid us communicate two or three times a year? Nowhere is this found. Therefore we must be very sure that, when we obey a command, it is our duty to see that we are obeying it exactly as it says. That is, we must pay attention to the place, the time, the purpose, the method and all the conditions in which it should take place.

Thus the good action that we wanted to perform will be perfect in every detail and well pleasing to God.

“You can see that the same thing applies to the case of Holy Communion. It is both necessary and very beneficial to the soul for a person to receive Communion frequently. It is also in obedience to the commandment of God. It is a good deed well done and well-pleasing to God. On the other hand to communicate only three times a year is neither in obedience to a command nor a perfect good deed. Because it is not good in itself, its results are not good.

“Therefore, like all the rest of God's commandments, every one requires the right time, as it says in the Book of Ecclesiastes, ‘For everything there is a season.’ This is true also with regard to the command about Holy Communion. We must receive the proper time; and that means the proper time is the moment when the priest exclaims, ‘In the fear of God and with faith and love draw near.’

“Is this heard only three times a year? Oh, no. Yet, although everyone must eat two or even three times a day in order that the material body may live, must the unfortunate soul only eat three times a year - or perhaps even once-the food that gives it life in order to live the spiritual life? And isn't this completely absurd? Even if this is not the case, I am very much afraid that we may be deriving no benefit from complying with the commandments, because we water them down and spoil them. So we are not keepers of the law, but breakers of the law.”

With the blessed saint's guidance, we now understand the teaching of the Church. Let us put aside judgment of others and look to our own selves. Prepare properly and with the fear of God, with faith and with love, draw near.

*St. Makarios of Corinth: On Patmos, Makarios was attracted by the Holy Cave of the Revelation and the Godly guarded Monastery of St. Christodoulos. There in 1782, with the permission of the Monastery of Saint John, Abp. Makarios founded a hermitage with a small church to honor All the Saints on Mount of Koumana and spent the next ten years. There he met Niphon of Chios, Gregory of Nisyros, and Athanasius of Armenia. In his isolation, Makarios began copying, by hand, the codices and wrote a biography of St. Christodoulos. Finding works of the Fathers of the Church in the monastery library, Makarios selected from them material for the Philokalia that, later, he gave to St. Nicodemus the Athonite.

In 1793, Abp. Makarios left Patmos for Corinth to settle the affairs of his father who had died, never to return. In Corinth, he divided the estate among his brothers, including his share, and then burned all his father's promissory notes thus destroying all the debts owed to his family.

During the following years Makarios settled into an ascetic life at his hermitage on Chios, writing books, confessing and counseling people, and being an encourager of new martyrs.

In September 1804, Abp. Makarios suffered a stroke that left his right hand paralyzed. On April 17, 1805, he died at the hermitage of St. Peter in Chios.