

2) CONFESS OUR SINS ON A REGULAR BASIS

We all know that when children play in the dirt outside, they need to come in and get cleaned up by either taking a bath, or washing their face and hands with soap and water. Parents do not allow their children to eat at the table when they are dirty. Likewise our Father in Heaven offers us a way to clean up our soul (and “wedding garment”) after getting it dirty through our sins. It is like taking a spiritual shower, if you will.

We come to confess our sins to God in the presence of the priest, our spiritual father. He is there to help us offer a sincere confession. As we come to repent of our sins, he assures us of God's forgiveness and love. He offers us spiritual guidance and direction so that we continue to strive daily to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect. He keeps us in a right relationship with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Just as we confess our physical illnesses to our doctor, and ask him for the proper medicine for healing, so, too, we confess our sins to God, through our spiritual father. In our repentance we seek to renew our life in Christ and to partake of “the medicine of immortality” for the healing of our body and soul.

With “power from on high” and a renewed sense of purpose, we can go back into the world to bring this wholeness of life, this salvation in Christ, to others. We can strive to be all that God has called us to be, and to continue the work of the Lord. To do this, we need to be at peace with everyone, to hold no grudges, to have forgiveness and love in our hearts. Only then will God forgive us. (See Matthew 6:14-15). Be mindful that without a proper confession of sins it is possible to eat and drink to our condemnation rather than to our salvation. St. Paul says,

“Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of (profaning) the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself (confession), and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup (communion). For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.” (1Cor.11:27-32).

A common guideline for those who receive communion each week is to offer their confession of sins at least every 4 months. This needs to be discussed with one's spiritual father/parish priest. If we are not frequent and regular in our partaking of communion, we need to come to confession each time before receiving communion.

3) KEEP OUR SATURDAY EVENING FREE FROM UNGODLY ACTIVITY Since we now realize that our purpose on earth is to prepare for the coming of our Bridegroom, our Saturday evenings should really be kept in a quiet and peaceful atmosphere, in a state of prayerful vigilance and anticipation. We should always keep in mind what happened to the five foolish virgins who did not have enough oil in their lamps. When they returned from getting more oil, they realized that the doors were shut and they were not allowed to enter. They were not spiritually prepared to greet the Bridegroom when he arrived. (See Matthew 25:1 ff.) We must be spiritually alert and ready at all times. Once the Bridegroom comes, it is too late to have our confession heard, or to start to say our prayers, or to read the Bible, or to come to church, or to feed the hungry, or to treat others with kindness, or to forgive, or to do anything else in preparation. At that point, the Kingdom is at hand for those who are ready and watchful.

4) PRAY THE PRE-COMMUNION PRAYERS BEFORE THE ICON OF OUR LORD

These prayers are to be said before we come to Church, either on Saturday evening or Sunday morning. They are found in most prayer books. One of the most frequently used prayer books is the little red *A Pocket Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians* published by the Antiochian Archdiocese. It is interesting to note that the Tradition of the Church offers us the Little Compline Service, with the Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion inserted in the middle. Thus we may gather together in the fullness of our godly nature as the Bride of Christ to prepare ourselves as one Body.

The following excerpts from the Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion are offered for you to recite at home.

- May Your holy Body be for me the bread of eternal life, O Merciful Lord, and Your precious Blood be remedy for my many diseases.
- Grant me, O Christ, tears to cleanse my heart's impurity, so that, with a good conscience, Master, I may approach with faith and fear to receive Your Divine Gifts.
- Heal the wounds of my soul, O Lord, and fully sanctify me, and count me worthy, O Master, that I, wretched person that I am, may partake of Your Divine and Mystical Supper.
- All-Holy Lady, reconcile me with Him Who was born of you, and keep me, your supplicating servant, free of stain and blameless, that I may be sanctified by receiving the Spiritual Pearl.
- Word of God, my God, may the live coal of Your Body be to the illumination of my clouded mind, and may Your Blood be for the cleansing of my defiled soul.
- May the reception of Your immortal Mysteries be to me a source of all goodness and light and life and calm, O Christ, and the means by which the divine virtues be cultivated in me so that I may glorify You, O Good One.
- Seeking refuge in Your mercy, O Good Savior, I cry unto You with fear: Abide in me and I in You, as You said. For lo, trusting in Your mercy, I eat Your Body and I drink Your Blood.
- May Your Precious Body and Blood, my Savior, become as a flame that consumes the substance of sin and the thorns of my passions; as a light also, that illumines me so that I may worship Your Divinity.

5) KEEP OUR SUNDAY MORNINGS FREE OF UNGODLY BEHAVIOR & PRESERVE THE TRADITION OF FASTING

Fasting is multifaceted. First of all, nothing is permitted to enter our mouths from midnight on, until we receive the Body and Blood of Christ. We fast from all food and drink, as well as from smoking and chewing gum. If, for example, someone invites us to their home for dinner, it is quite doubtful that we would eat a full meal, or anything else for that matter, before we go. We ought to show the same, if not more, respect to our God as we prepare for His arrival. (Brushing our teeth is recommended, to make it more appealing to the Lord, and each other – just don't swallow the water.) Please Note: If we are on medication or are pregnant, and must eat “a little something” with our medicine -our spiritual father/parish priest must first grant permission for this - then let it be something like water and toast. Concerning children: By the time they reach the age of 7, they can begin to fast from all food and drink in the morning. This, too, needs to be discussed with one's spiritual father/parish priest.

It is also proper for us to fast from unnecessary noise in the house, like blaring radios and the like. Keeping watch for the Bridegroom does not end until He comes in the Divine Liturgy. Therefore, we should maintain ourselves in a prayerful atmosphere on Sunday mornings as well. This can be a little challenging to those families with children, but not impossible. We need to sincerely try, and to teach our children to do the same.

6) PARTICIPATE IN THE DIVINE LITURGY WITH ENTHUSIASM & JOY

We do not come to church to watch the priest do “his thing” and listen to the choir “perform” as if we are attending a concert. We are all in this together. The priest leads us in our worship of God, and the choir leads the congregation in their responses. Nor do we come to church to say our private prayers. They should be said at home before we come. When we gather together as the Church and Bride of Christ, we come to offer the Prayer of the Church with one mouth and one heart, to unite ourselves to what the Church as a whole is praying. All of us should come on time, sing, be attentive to what is taking place with the utmost of joy, putting aside all worldly cares, and prepare to receive the Eucharist.

CONCLUSION

This is the Tradition of the Holy Orthodox Church that has been handed down to us from the time Jesus established the Church. It is up to us to preserve it whole and unharmed, lest we wake up one morning and realize that it has been taken away from us and given to someone else. (See Matt. 21: 33 ff.) The time has come for us to get “back to basics.” We need to understand that the first and foremost purpose of our Church is to help us all become “The Church and Bride of Christ” (Eph. 5:2 ff.), working fervently to become one with our Lord. This happens when we study His Word, when we grow and mature in the Faith, and when we do God's work as we live in the world. It is not an impossible task, for ALL things are possible to him who believes! (Mark 9:23) Remember, there were no bazaars and bake sales in the first century; only people who “continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers ...continuing daily with one accord in the temple...” (Acts 2:42,46)

The following words written by St. John the Evangelist in the Book of Revelation (19:4-9) give us insight into the life in God's Kingdom:

And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who sat on the throne, saying, “Amen! Alleluia!” Then a voice came from the throne saying, “Praise our God, all you His servants and those who fear Him, both small and great!” And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.” And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he (the angel) said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’” And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God.”

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PREPARING TO RECEIVE THE BODY & BLOOD OF OUR LORD GOD & SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST

INTRODUCTION

To help us understand how to prepare to receive the Eucharist, let us consider the following analogy. When a man meets a woman and they fall in love, they soon begin to plan for the great and joyous wedding celebration, the feast at the altar of God. On that day, as a sign of their great and abiding love for each other, the bride and groom prepare themselves to look as beautiful as ever, clothed in the finest of wedding garments. They come together before their God, who “*has ordained for them an indissoluble bond of love,*” and reveal to all those present their eternal commitment, trust and faithfulness to one another. And, of course, there is great joy and celebration in the reception that follows.

The same is true for us as Orthodox Christians. Jesus is our Bridegroom, and we, the Church, are His Bride. In fact, St. Paul says, “*For I am jealous of you with a godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you (in baptism) to one husband (Christ) that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.*” (2Cor.11:2) Thus, every Divine Liturgy is a Wedding Feast for which we, as the Bride, must prepare ourselves to meet Jesus our Bridegroom. We come to God asking His help to make “the wedding garment of our soul” radiant. Then, when we meet Christ at the altar of God, we will shine with great radiance and inner beauty. Through God's grace, when we partake of holy communion and continue to bear witness to our eternal commitment, trust, and faithfulness to Christ as our Savior, we become one with Him, in a common union an “*indissoluble bond of love.*” We hope to continue the celebration in the Kingdom of Heaven, our eternal Reception, where the Bride and Groom together partake of the Tree of Life, and praise and glorify our God forever.

If we desire to be faithful in our Orthodox Christian practice and carry on the Tradition of our Faith, what then are we to do in preparation to receive the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ? The following guidelines from our Orthodox Christian Tradition help us make “the garment of our soul” radiant before we come to meet Christ, our Bridegroom.

1) PARTICIPATE IN GREAT VESPERS ON SATURDAY EVENING

In the Book of Genesis, we read at the end of the first day of creation the words: “*And there was evening and there was morning, one day.*” This pattern, which is followed for each day of the creation, reveals to us that the day begins in the evening. It follows then that Sunday begins on Saturday evening. What better way for Orthodox Christians to begin Sunday, the day of our Lord's resurrection, than to gather together as a Family for common worship and prayer to our God. Just as we get together with our earthly family members for fellowship and conversation, we need to do the same with our heavenly and earthly spiritual Family. Since it is proper for the first of all things to be offered to the Lord, then the first part of our week (and really each day) should be a Family offering as a sacrifice to Him Who created us. This is Saturday evening with Great Vespers.

If your parish does not offer Saturday evening Vespers one can still prepare at home by reading the Gospel and Epistle readings for the next day, reading the Compline prayers as a family or by oneself, and reading the pre-communion prayers along with the evening prayers (see #4).