

On Confession and Communion

An Excerpt from the Parish Life Handbook of Saints Cyril and Methodius Orthodox Church, Terryville, CT

It is a great temptation to talk about “minimums” in Church life. We all too often wish to reduce the Life in Christ, which ought to be of concern to us everywhere and always, to some set of “minimum obligations.” So, it is with some trepidation that we dare enter into this discussion of Confession and Communion.

In our parish frequent and regular participation in Holy Communion has become the norm for most of those regularly participating in the life of the parish. This is, at core, a good thing. But, we must not abuse the privilege. Privileges always come with accompanying responsibilities. For as incorrect as it might be to refuse the call to “In the fear of God, with faith and love draw near,” it is at least as bad to receive the Holy Things in a thoughtless manner without due care and preparation. Certainly, we ought to be receiving Holy Communion regularly and even frequently. But we must do so with correct preparation, never feeling worthy to draw near, except insofar as our Lord’s love and mercy makes it possible for us to participate in His Broken Body and Spilled Blood.

Among other things (and we are limited here by time and space), correct preparation for the reception of Holy Communion includes, as an absolutely essential part, participation in the Mystery (Sacrament) of Holy Confession. By Holy Confession, we are here referring not to the practice often termed “General Confession,” but to the traditional practice of what is usually termed private or personal Confession.

When, in times past, people did not receive Holy Communion on a frequent basis, often only approaching the Chalice once or twice a year, each reception of the Holy Things was preceded by participation in the Sacrament of Confession.

In February 1972, in response to the growing revival of frequent and regular participation in Holy Communion by the faithful, the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America issued an encyclical, an official letter, on the subject of Confession and Communion. This encyclical still stands as the official statement of our Church concerning Confession and Communion. In that letter, the statement was made that the norm for any person regularly approaching Holy Communion would be that the same person would participate in private, personal Confession at least once a month, that is twelve times a year, while also on a regular basis participating in the rite that has come to be termed General Confession. (General Confession, in this context, refers to a rite in which the priest on behalf of those gathered makes a general confession of sins. Then the prayer of absolution is read in turn personally over each person present, at which time each one is given a chance additionally to confess any other sins they might want to mention specifically before receiving absolution.)

Given these directives of our Bishops, how are we to order our lives in our parish?

The fact of the matter is that in our parish, where more than one hundred persons regularly receive Holy Communion, it would presently be quite difficult for me to hear one hundred private Confessions a month. To do so with any seriousness regarding the sacrament or any depth of pastoral care towards the penitents would be nearly impossible.

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So, as a concession to our weakness, and following an approach that is usual and customary presently in the parishes of the Orthodox Church in America, the following is what we endeavor to do in our parish as regards Confession and Communion:

- Those regularly and frequently receiving Holy Communion should endeavor to prepare themselves through prayer and fasting each time that they will be approaching the Chalice. This preparation properly includes attendance at the Vigil the evening before the Divine Liturgy (especially on Saturday evenings), the keeping of the evening and night before the reception of Holy Communion in a quiet, peaceful and prayerful manner, usually including the reading of certain prayers to prepare one's self for receiving the Holy Things the next morning, and complete abstinence from food and drink from midnight preceding the morning of the Divine Liturgy at which one will receive Holy Communion. If some issue or concern is particularly weighing on a person's conscience he or she should endeavor to resolve this issue, as soon as possible and before receiving Holy Communion, by seeking me out for consultation. If anyone needs guidance in the matter of preparation through prayer and fasting for Holy Communion, please see me so that we might discuss the subject.
- Those regularly and frequently receiving Holy Communion should also endeavor to regularly participate in the Sacrament of Confession. It seems that the rhythm that is most workable in this regard is that each faithful person who is regularly and frequently approaching the Chalice should *without fail* come to private, personal Confession during Great Lent and also during the Nativity Fast (Advent). This is the "minimum," if we are so bold as to dare speak of such a thing as a minimum. Each regular communicant should also strongly consider coming for private, personal Confession during one or both of the other two major fasting seasons in the Church's calendar, that is, the Apostles' Fast (kept each year from the Monday after All Saints Day through to the Feast of Ss. Peter and Paul on June 29) and the Dormition Fast (August 1-14, each year). Some people who are facing particularly acute spiritual challenges in their lives may find it appropriate and helpful to confess privately and personally on an even more frequent basis. Over-scrupulosity, however, should also be avoided. In the end, each person needs to work out a regular rhythm in this regard that is compatible both with the regular reception of Holy Communion and the particular circumstances of his or her own life.
- At any time, if one falls into particular sin, one should, without delay, make an appointment and come for private, personal Confession. It is dangerous to put off participation in the Sacrament of Confession to a later time if one is either in an obvious state of sin, or carrying in one's conscience the remembrance of a particularly weighty sin. It is especially spiritually unhealthy to put off necessary participation in the Sacrament of Confession, while continuing at the same time to approach the Chalice for Holy Communion.

As an addition to (but absolutely *not* a replacement for) this rhythm of private, personal Confession, we use in our parish a rite of so-called General Confession. Outside of the four major fasting seasons, usually on fourth Saturday of each month, after Vigil, we gather for this rite. Hopefully, through the careful and prayerful use of this rite we will bridge the gap in our lives from personal Confession to personal Confession, and thus will remain in the proper mindset of repentance and renewal as we regularly participate in Holy Communion.

