

Holy Communion
ReCatechism 2
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Tonight's discussion is the final one in our series of talks, which we've dubbed *Re-Catechism II*, discussing "the Sacramental Life" of the Orthodox Church.

Re-Catechism II began with the first 2 "Sacraments" a faithful Orthodox Christian participates in. Through the waters of baptism, the believer is "clothed in Christ", embracing a new life in which they are no longer the centre of their lives, but *Christ* is. Chrismation soon follows, as "the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit", preparing them for the battle "not against flesh and blood" – but against the evil one – they are going to engage in.

The sessions soon dealt with the rest of the so-called "Seven Sacraments". In *Marriage*, we learned that two people no longer walk to the Kingdom of God separately, but walk **united**, "as the two become one flesh". In *Ordination*, we hear of certain people of the Royal Priesthood (i.e. the Christian Church) accepting the call to offer their gifts to the faithful, helping lead them to the Kingdom of God. In *Holy Unction*, the suffering Christian (who is suffering either physically, emotionally, and/or spiritually) feels the grace of the Holy Spirit, helping them to know that God is there in their difficulties. In *Repentance and Confession*, Christians realize when they detour off the road to salvation and reset their "spiritual GPS".

All the "sacraments", these services where we profess our trust and obedience to the grace of God, lead up to the greatest – the "Queen" – of all "Sacraments". This is the most intimate experience any person can have with the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We know it by different names: «η Σύναξις», the Divine Liturgy, the Eucharist, «η Ανάμνησις», Holy Communion. This "sacrament" has unfortunately been "put in a box" by scholastic theologians, labelled as "one of the seven sacraments". Yet, Orthodox Theology shows us the Eucharist transcends the way we look at "the Sacraments" in general. It is *the* Sacrament, connected with all the others in one way or another.

Holy Communion: The Medicine of Immortality is simply that: offering immortality to Christians since the moment it was first celebrated in the Upper Room before the Lord's death. It is – without doubt – a moment to give **THANKS**.

T – The Biblical Experience

H – History and Evolution of the Eucharist

A – Analysis of Liturgy

N – Non-Orthodox Theology

K – Kneeling and Other Practices during the Liturgy

S – Separation and Communion

T – The Biblical Experience

Every Sacrament can be found in the pages of the Bible. The Eucharist, although instituted in the New Testament, was alluded to by God's Providence in the Old Testament. The first moment it was alluded to was in the Garden of Eden, as Adam and Eve were in *communion* with God (until their disobedience). Later on, we find Abraham inviting the three angels into his home and dining together with them (a reason we find this icon of "the Hospitality of Abraham" on so many Altar screens, especially where the "Beautiful Gate" is).

While there are other such examples in the Old Testament, we hear of the "biblical experience" of Holy Communion in the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke (along with the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians). The setting is the "Upper Room", where Jesus and disciples are for dinner (if it is the Passover or not, we really don't know). Knowing "the hour had come", Jesus took bread in His hands and said to His disciples the famous words: "Take, eat: this is My Body which is broken for you" (1 Cor. 11:24). After they have eaten the Heavenly Bread, Jesus took the Cup of wine and said again to His disciples, "Drink of this, all of you, this is My blood, of the New Covenant." (cf. Luke 22:20)

It is important for us to hear these words – "Take, eat, this is My Body" and "Drink of this, all of you, this is My Blood" – and to *really listen* to what Jesus is saying. He is **not** saying "this represents My Body and Blood". He says "IS" and not "represents". All early Christians believed His words to be literal, and not metaphoric. It is something the Orthodox Church continues to believe today. In a world that always wants to "see proof", this is one of those moments that the only answer we can give to the question "how does it happen" must be "it is a miracle". Miracles do happen – and this is one of them. The Holy Spirit sanctifies the Gifts, but *exactly how*, we do not know. Jesus tells us Himself: "Blessed are those who do not see, and yet believe" (Jn. 20:29).

After the Resurrection, we find Christ appearing many times to the disciples. Of the many times He appeared to them, He "celebrated the Eucharist" with them. For example, *the Meal at Emmaus* (Luke 24:13-35) is when Jesus appeared to two disciples. They didn't recognize Him until He took the bread in His hands, broke it and gave it to them. Once they recognized Him, He disappeared from them.

The disciples followed the words of their Master in the post-Resurrectional New Testament book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, hearing of "the breaking of the bread". They gathered every Sunday ('the first day of the week') and celebrated the Eucharist, because *that* was the centre of their worship. By the Eucharist, early Christians proclaimed the Lord's death "until He comes" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:26).

From **the Biblical Experience**, the Church then progressed to the post-Apostolic era.

H – History and Evolution of the Eucharist

As we said before, Holy Communion was seen as the centre of Sacramental life throughout the early Christian Church. For example, Christians would celebrate the Liturgy on the tombs of the Martyrs in the early Church. This way, they showed how: (i) Christians never forgot about those who had passed away, (ii) Christians believed that even though you die in this life, it doesn't mean you have ceased to exist, and (iii) the Eucharist unites both living and dead –the living praying for the dead (with our first image of the Christian “*mnimosinon*”). Christians continue the practice of celebrating the Liturgy on the tombs of the martyrs even today, as the Altar Table of consecrated Churches contain the relics of martyrs.

After the **Edict of Milan** (when the State stopped persecuting Christians, ceasing to kill them through a variety of ways), trends with Holy Communion began to take different shapes and forms. Various people wrote different types of “Liturgies”. The way that people received Holy Communion has changed. While in the early Church, people would receive from the same Chalice and receive the Body of Christ in their hands, the Church later on decided to create the “communion spoon” (the *λαβίδα*), for practical reasons.

Something else that also developed through the history of the Church was the less-frequent reception of Holy Communion. The Early Christians received every Sunday and every liturgy (*it's the whole point of going to Liturgy!*); today, however, many people only go once or twice a year, because they feel “unworthy” to receive often. We see this trend developing throughout the Turkish occupation, especially within the monastic community. Yet, something people knew from early on is that *no one is worthy* to receive Holy Communion. Even St. Paul said that he himself is the “first of the sinners”. The early Christians received because they saw Holy Communion as medicine, not a “reward”. The moment Holy Communion is seen as a “reward” for “doing something good”, we lose the overall meaning of what Holy Communion is supposed to be – medicine for us who are spiritually ill.

A – Analysis of Liturgy

Presently, the Orthodox Church has 4 different types of Divine Liturgies. **The Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom** is celebrated at almost every feastday and Sunday, as it is the shortest of all the Liturgies (believe it or not). **The Liturgy of St. Basil the Great** has the same structure as St. John Chrysostom's, and is celebrated 10 times a year: January 1st, Epiphany Eve, the 5 Sundays of Lent, Holy Thursday Morning, Holy Saturday morning and Christmas Eve). **The Liturgy of St. James** is celebrated twice a year – on the feasts of the Saint (October 21st and the Sunday after Christmas). The so-called “**Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts**” is a special service held on Wednesdays of Great Lent and Holy Wednesday morning. This last liturgy is not really a liturgy at all; rather, it is a Vespers service with prayers for Holy Communion at the end.

In regards to the structure of the Liturgy, it is divided into two parts: **the Liturgy of the Word** (or, “*Liturgy of the Catechumens*”) and **the Liturgy of the Sacrifice** (or, “*Liturgy of the Faithful*”).

The two main Liturgies celebrated (St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil the Great) begin with the Liturgy of the Word and the blessing, “Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” («Ευλογημένη η Βασιλεία του Πατρός και του Υιού και του Αγίου Πνεύματος...»). This beginning was actually written in about the 13th century, which shows the Liturgy has developed throughout the centuries.

The Liturgy of the Word consists of the Antiphons, the “Little Entrance” (the entrance with the Priest holding the Book of the Gospels), the hymns of the day, the “Thrice-Holy Hymn” (“*Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us*”), the two New Testament Readings (Epistle and Gospel) and the Sermon (*the only reason we do the sermon later on in the liturgy, and not after the Gospel, is because many show up late*).

The last part of the Liturgy of the Word is the *Prayer of the Catechumens*. Catechumens are people who were not full-fledged Christians but were going to be baptized soon. The Church prays for them, hoping they will be found worthy of being baptized soon.

After this, the **Liturgy of the Sacrifice** began. It begins with the Prayers for the faithful and the Cherubic Hymn (as we “set aside all the cares of life [to receive] the King of all”). After “the Completed Litany”, prayers for God to protect us, the Kiss of Peace is exchanged, showing that one of the subthemes of the Liturgy is brotherhood (as we’re all brothers and sisters in Christ). In the Bible, we hear the words of Christ: “When you are offering your gift at the altar and then remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar and make peace with your brother; then, come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). The Church offers the opportunity to its faithful to make peace with one another. It’s something we should all be doing at the Divine Liturgy saying the words the Clergy say in the Altar: «**Ο Χριστός εν μέσσω ημών! Και έστι και έσται εις αιώνας αιώνων!**» (“**Christ is in our midst! He is and ever shall be unto the ages of ages!**”)

The recitation of the Creed follows. This is a statement of faith as it is passed down by the Councils of the Holy Fathers of the Church.

After this point comes the heart of the Liturgy: the **Anaphora**, the section of the Liturgy where the celebrant (the Bishop or the Priest) asks God to sanctify the congregation together with the Bread and Wine, changing them into the Body and Blood of Christ. The Anaphora of St. John Chrysostom is a perfect example of what the Liturgy is all about – **giving thanks**:

“It is proper and right to sing to You, bless You, praise You, thank You and worship You in all places of Your dominion.... You brought us into being out of nothing, and when we fell You raised us up again. You did not cease doing

everything until You led us to Heaven and granted us Your Kingdom to come. For all these things we thank You... for all things known and unknown, blessings seen and unseen that have been bestowed upon us...“

The “Words of Institution” are said in this section (i.e. “Take, eat...” and “Drink of this, all of you...”). The *epiclesis* then is recited, asking God to come down and to bless the Bread and Wine, changing them into the Body and Blood of Christ, *along with* blessing the people of God. We then call to remembrance the Theotokos, the Saints, along with those who have passed away and those of us who are living. The Anaphora concludes with a prayer taken from the text of the New Testament: “**May the mercy of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ be with all of you!**” (cf. *Philippians 4:9, 2 Timothy 1: 13 - 14, Ephesians 6: 23 - 24*)

We then recite “The Sunday Prayer” (Η Κυριακή Προσευχή), or (as we know it) **the Lord’s Prayer** and the reception of Holy Communion. The Priest or Deacon says, “Let us be attentive!” («Πρόσχωμεν!»). We are all called to ‘pay attention’ at this point, as *this is the reason we’re all the Eucharist!* He then says «Τα ἅγια τοῖς ἁγίοις», or “the Holy Gifts for the holy people of God”. Who are the people of God? **We are**. As members of the Church, we are called to Sainthood – and Sainthood is progressive. At our baptism, we become saints; throughout our lives, we work towards sainthood; and, finally, at the Second Coming, our Lord will glorify those who have loved Him and declare them Saints of Heaven.

The final part of the Liturgy is the thanksgiving for receiving Holy Communion, realizing that it is – again – a Heavenly Gift. The Blessing of the Bread is supposed to be done at Vespers services the previous evening and Memorials to be done on Saturdays (and outside the Liturgy). However, for practical reasons, we have both done during the last part of the Liturgy. The final prayer, «Δι’ευχών των Ἁγίων Πατέρων ημών» (“Through the Prayers of our Holy Fathers”) is a clear indication of our link with the monastic community, as the “holy fathers” referred by the author of this prayer were monks of a monastery.

A final note on the liturgical text: It is important for faithful to **not** say the part of the Priest or Bishop. Everything in the Divine Liturgy is a dialogue: the Priest says the prayer, the people respond. Clergy say the prayers and we answer. If we say what the priest is saying, then we’re not doing what *we’re* supposed to do: respond! People usually say the prayers because they feel they cannot participate in the worship services because the chanter’s parts are difficult. For people looking to participate, our Parish is blessed with two Choirs and various chanters. If one does not know how to chant the selected hymns, try to at least respond softly while in the pews – it’s a start to participating more fully in the services.

As Orthodox Christians, we believe that Holy Communion is the Body and Blood of Christ that cleanses us and unites us to God. However, we hear what the non-Orthodox believe about the Eucharist often. This is why I find it important to know what *they* believe, in order that we can answer *their* questions when they ask us.

N – Non-Orthodox Theology

The classic words of the non-Orthodox are:

Communion is just a symbol – As we said before, Communion is not a symbol at all. It is the actual Body and Blood of Christ. Jesus said *this is My Body and Blood* to the disciples, and consequently says it to all believers. People that believe it is a symbol usually think they could become sick by receiving Holy Communion. Yet, in times of epidemics such as the Plague, AIDS, cancer, SARS and H1N1, our clergy still went to hospitals and homes to commune the faithful. Clergy had to consume the rest of the Holy Communion after they were done. If this was true, our clergy would all be dead by now (along with all the laypeople that communed); yet, they all lived, with no one suffering even a sickness due to consuming the Gifts. In the end, it is a matter of faith: we believe in Jesus' words or not.

Use “unleavened bread”: Roman Catholics use ‘unleavened bread’ for Holy Communion. We said, however, that we don't know if the Last and Mystical Supper took place on the Passover or not. Also, the Evangelists tell us that Christ took ἄρτον in His hands and broke it. Ἄρτος is bread – regular bread. It is not unleavened bread.

Once a year Communion: Some Protestant denominations hold their form of the Eucharist once a month or even once a year. This is something that is not in agreement with the practice of the Ancient Church, which gathered every Sunday for the Eucharist. This practice, unfortunately, is also done by our people who commune once or twice a year. The whole point of the Liturgy is to commune. Therefore, unless we're attending the Eucharist twice a year (and I pray we come to Church more often), we should all be communing more often than this.

There are many other differences, to be sure, when dealing with Holy Communion and the theology of other confessions. It's important we touch on them a little bit to understand that we, as Orthodox, have a responsibility to know our theology somewhat so we can respond to those who ask us and not merely say “I don't know” to their questions. As Metropolitan Nikitas of the Dardanelles said during his recent visit to Toronto, “we usually shut the door to Jehovah's Witnesses not because we can't be bothered with them, but because we can't answer their questions.”

From this, we go to a more practical part of the Eucharist: kneeling, standing, sitting and the rest of the so-called “Liturgical Aerobics”.

K – Kneeling and Other Practices during the Liturgy

Kneeling is a very common practice in our Church. In the Divine Liturgy, many people usually kneel during the *Epiclesis* upon hearing «Τὰ σα ἐκ τῶν σῶν», (“We offer to You these gifts”). Some people kneel at other times of the Liturgy, but that is a pietistic practice which shouldn't concern us.

According to Church canon law, we can kneel at any time *except Sunday and throughout the 40 days of Pascha*, as we remember the Resurrection. To answer the question of these people that do kneel on Sundays, we should hear the words of the early Christians (both Saints and ecclesiastical authors) who tell us otherwise:

- “On the first day of the week we stand when we pray. The reason is that on the day of Resurrection, by standing at prayer, we remind ourselves of the grace we have received.” (*St. Basil the Great*)
- “Since there are some communities that still bend their knees on the Lord's Day and on the days of Pentecost, this Holy Council decrees that the common prayers (i.e., at Liturgy) are to be rendered to God standing.” (*Canon 20 of the First Ecumenical Council, Nicaea, 325*)

When it comes to **crossing ourselves**, there is no “rule” that says “you must cross yourself at this time, once, twice or three times”. People usually cross themselves when they hear the Holy Trinity or the Theotokos mentioned, but faithful can cross themselves at any point of worship.

Sometimes, people do not only cross themselves, but do **genuflections**. This is the action where someone touches the ground after they cross themselves. There are small and great “**μετάνοιες**”, which is a prostration to the ground. These are pietistic practices and are not needed during the liturgy.

So, when should one **stand**? We *always* stand during the incensing of the church, at the Gospel reading, the Little and Great Entrances, the Anaphora and Consecration of the Holy Gifts, during the distribution of Holy Communion, whenever a priest gives a blessing and during the Dismissal. **Sitting** is a very new phenomenon in the Church, as pews were not present in the Ancient or Byzantine Church.

In regards to saying private prayers with your **prayer rope** (or **κομποσκήνη**), please note this is not a correct practice for communal worship. The prayer rope prayers are reserved for private prayer. Although people do this with the best of intentions, one should refrain from using their prayer rope during worship and chant together with the chanter.

With this, we come to the close of our presentation with the most important of all the points:

S – Separation and Communion

The biggest problem for many “Orthodox Christians” is that they feel the Liturgy is not important. We’ve all heard the classic lines, and maybe even used them ourselves: “God is everywhere. I can pray at home. I don’t need to go to Church so they can take my money away from me and spend it on themselves.”

These excuses are the reason our spirituality as a Church goes from bad to worse every day.

To somewhat address the above points:

1. Yes, God is everywhere, but Christians always gathered together to pray. We find it in the Bible, we find it in the testimony of the Saints. God is everywhere, but He commands us to come together to celebrate the Eucharist.
2. Prayer at home is encouraged, even commanded, by Jesus Christ in the Gospels. He says to shut ourselves in our rooms and pray in secret, so that people don't see us (cf. Matthew 6:6). Yet, He also says "where two or three are gathered in My Name, I Am in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). St. Basil the Great continues on this point by saying, *'If anyone claims to be able to be completely self-sufficient, to be capable of reaching perfections without anyone else's help, to succeed in understanding the depths of Scripture entirely unaided, he is behaving just like someone trying to practice the trade of a carpenter without touching wood. The Apostle would say to such: "It is not the hearers of the Law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the Law who will be justified" (Rom. 2:13)'*. The Eucharist and the Church are connected from the time of Christ and the Apostles; therefore, communal prayer is the bedrock of an Orthodox prayer life.
3. People that usually complain about 'how much money goes to the Church' are people that do not realize the Church needs to pay the water bill, the phone bill, the heating and air conditioning, the electricity and the list goes on. It goes to the salaries of the Priest and the others who work for this Church. The donations of the faithful don't only go to our Church, but to the many programs we have: Sunday School, Philoptochos, feeding the hungry at Christmas and Pascha, and the list goes on. This is all done because the people of God – the Church – come together and help people in need.

If we, however, choose to not attend the services for reasons such as those listed above, we might fall into *ακοινωνισία* (or, "excommunication"). When people hear this word, they think of it as a punishment for something they have done. This can't be further from the truth, however. Excommunication is a self-inflicted wound that the Church would remind its people they have suffered. Excommunication is usually "imposed" when people deny Christ and His love, usually saying something like "Jesus is only human" or "Jesus is only divine" or something like this. When we choose to not take part in the Sacramental Life of the Church, we excommunicate ourselves.

When a person does not believe in the basic tenets of the Faith, and consequently doesn't believe in Christ Himself, he or she cannot commune. Holy Communion is for the faithful – the ultimate expression of their union with God and His Church. The moment you don't believe, how can you receive? This is the same reason non-Orthodox Christians cannot receive Holy Communion. We pray for the non-Orthodox, but we can't partake from the same Chalice. It is our prayer we all do one day, and we all become true brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the end, separation is different from individuality. Being an individual is knowing that everyone is unique in the eyes of God. Yet, every small pebble that is put together makes a beautiful mosaic – *exactly how the Church should be*. It is as the ancient Church saying says: *lex orandi lex credendi* (“the law of prayer is the law of belief”). If we believe that we are *truly* brothers and sisters in Christ, we should express it in our prayer life, in our Eucharistic unity. Union with God is manifested in the unity we have with our neighbour, for “If any man says, ‘I love God’ but hate their brother or sister, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). That is why the phrase “Let us love one another”, the act of the Kiss of Peace, the mutual forgiveness we should partake in are all so important.

This whole discussion of the Eucharist, of the Divine Liturgy, of Holy Communion is truly the culmination of our lives as Christians. Jesus says it Himself, and it is the thought we should all carry with us as we approach the Chalice at any time – especially now as we approach the saving Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ: “He or she who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me and I in him.” (John 6:56)

It is our prayer that we always give **THANKS** at the Eucharist – not merely to be lukewarm Christians that come for the ritual and a type of social fellowship, but Christians that come for Christ, looking for fellowship with our brothers and sisters on earth and with our Lord who is in Heaven. As St. Maximus the Confessor says:

“As we believe that we have participated in the gifts of the Holy Spirit here, *in the present life, through the grace which is by faith*, so we believe that we shall take possession of these gifts *in the age to come in truth*, really and in actual fact, according to the unfailing hope of our faith and the sure and inviolable promise of him who gave us this promise. Having kept the commandments according to our ability, [we shall receive these gifts,] moving *from the grace which is by faith to grace by sight*, as our God and Saviour Jesus Christ transforms us to be like himself, *by taking away the characteristics of corruption which are in us....*”

Let’s all remember Holy Communion truly is **“the medicine of immortality, the antidote to prevent us from dying, but [which causes] that we should live forever in Jesus Christ”** (Epistle of St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Ephesians, Chapter 20).

Καλή Ανάσταση!

Want to Learn More about the Eucharist and the Orthodox Faith?

In Bookstores...

John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 162.

Rev. Nikon D. Patrinos, *A Dictionary of Greek Orthodoxy* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Light and Life Publishing, 1997), 85.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, *Great Lent* (New York, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Toronto, Ontario: Penguin Books, 1997).

John D. Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop during the First Three Centuries* (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001).

On the Web...

www.ec-patr.org – Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

www.ecclesia.gr – The Church of Greece

www.myriobiblos.gr – The e-text Library of the Church of Greece

www.goarch.org – Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

www.oca.org – Orthodox Church in America

www.gocanada.org – Greek Orthodox Metropolis of Toronto (Canada)

<http://www.orthodoxytoday.org> – Website with various articles on Orthodox life

<http://www.orthodoxcentral.com/articles/bibleinliturgy.htm> – See texts of the New Testament present in the Divine Liturgy by visiting this website

<http://sgpm.goarch.org/ematins/matins.htm> -- Text in Greek and English for Matins, the service before the Divine Liturgy