

Food for Thought: Fasting Before Communion

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In the Catholic discipline, we are **required to fast from all food and drink** (except water and medicine) **for one hour before Communion**. For the average Byzantine Catholic parish, this signifies a **virtually meaningless fast**, since the distribution of Holy Communion is usually about forty minutes after the beginning of the Liturgy, and certainly the average travel time is about twenty minutes. Those of us who are old enough can remember that the Communion Fast was once much more strict. You were supposed to abstain from food and water from midnight on the day you were to receive Communion. From the early twentieth century, **Pope St. Pius X** wanted to increase the frequency of Holy Communion. Since the fast was perceived as reducing the frequency of Communion, and since evening Liturgies were being introduced, **Pope Pius XII** reduced the fast to three hours in 1953, and then to one hour in 1957. **Pope Paul VI** reaffirmed this in 1964, and the one hour abstention has become a part of the Latin Canon Law. The Orthodox Church continues to observe the stricter law, usually prescribing an absolute fast from midnight for morning Liturgies and six hours for evening Liturgies.

The clear purpose of fasting was to underline the importance of the sacramental mystery we are receiving. The fast from midnight was a sign that the first food we should receive is the “bread of life,” the holy Body and Blood of our Lord, which is food both of body and soul and prepares us for eternal life. In chapter 6 of the Gospel of John, Jesus taught that this divine gift of the Eucharist perfected and replaced the manna of the desert that had been given to the people of Israel in their journey to the Promised Land. This gift was so holy and so life-giving that nothing else should be eaten before it.

However, for the same reason, there should also be no obstacles to receiving the Eucharist. The question that continues to rise, and which depends on the strictness of our mentality, is whether a very lenient fast should be maintained, or whether a more strict fast should be re-imposed.

This question was raised by the **Sacred Congregation for the Eastern Churches in its Liturgical Instruction of January, 1996**. Because it makes the point so well, I will quote from it extensively:

«The change in the discipline of the Eucharistic fast has contributed to the development of a greater participation in the Eucharist, although it has sometimes contributed to weakening the awareness of the extraordinary value and meaning of the mystery celebrated. Canon 707 § 1 of the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches refers legislation in this regard to the particular law (of the individual Churches). An eventual restoration, at least partial, of the ancient norms for fasting in the Eastern Catholic Churches is valued opportune, taking into account the meaning of both the traditional practice, which does not always coincide with the Latin sensitivity, and of the need to correspond with the different conditions of life in the world today.» (Paragraph 62)

The Liturgical Instruction was issued seventeen years ago, and no action has been taken on Paragraph 62. This brings up the whole question of **the role of asceticism in the Christian life, which has become very problematic in a consumer society**. Certainly, I [Archpriest David Petras] would not like to see the introduction of a strict law that would discourage people from receiving Communion frequently. **Communion is, for the faithful believer, the true “Bread of life.” It brings us into union with God through the Body and Blood of our Lord, food for both body and soul. It is, in fact, our chief defense against sin, for it brings forgiveness of sins to the one who receives it with a full and open faith, and it is, in truth, the**

beginning of our eternal life in God. Our Lord was correct when he said, “If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (John 6: 53) For over a hundred years now, the Church has done everything possible to encourage frequent Communion. This has also been the stated desire of many Orthodox theologians. In the Orthodox Church there has been some relaxation of the laws, particularly in regard to evening Liturgies, but their authority and tradition has not allowed the more radical reform of the Western Church.

Where do we go from here? I do not think the legalistic route would be the best. For too long we followed the letter of the law rather than the spirit. This can be seen in the former traditional Catholic law of abstinence from meat on Friday. The Church did not want people to mistakenly think that simply to eat meat on Friday would be a mortal sin, so it tried to change the law by giving people the freedom to abstain or substitute some equivalent penance. For the legal mind, however, this simply meant: now we can eat meat on Friday, there is no more law. When I was young, some priests taught, erroneously, I believe, that to do more than the minimum requirements of the Church law was to commit pride. There are many ritual laws in the Church regarding fast, abstinence and church attendance, which the faithful either keep legally or simply ignore. **What is needed more is not new laws, but the revival of the spirit of the practice. WE ABSTAIN BEFORE RECEIVING COMMUNION BECAUSE WE RECOGNIZE THE SANCTITY OF THIS DIVINE FOOD. IT SHOULD BE THE FIRST FOOD WE TAKE IN THE DAY.** There are reasons why we may have to eat before Communion, such as physical weakness or illness, or age, either too young or too old, but to eat in these circumstances is not disrespect for the Eucharist, but acknowledgment of our bodily weakness. The Eucharist remains most important as the source of life. The challenge for the Church today is to foster a respect for Communion without imposing laws that will be observed only in a legal way.