

Preparation for Holy Communion

10 Things¹

O God the Lord and Creator of all, Thou art become poor, uniting a created nature to Thyself, while remaining free from passion. Since Thou art the Passover, Thou hast offered Thyself to those for whose sake Thou wast soon to die; and Thou hast cried: 'Eat My Body, and ye shall be firmly established in the faith.'²

1. The most important “thing” about preparation for preparing for communion is that **one must strive to be a Christian**. If you are not trying to live a Christian life, you should not be going to communion.

Definitely, go to confession and seek counsel, but if you are not trying to live a Christian life, then you should not approach the cup.

I cannot emphasize enough that you should not make this decision for yourself. This is the role and responsibility of the confessor.

You may consider yourself to be “not trying” but the confessor may see things very differently. Sometimes being addicted to a sin, or being unable to start something good (such as prayer, or consistent fasting, and a thousand other things) can make a person think that they are not trying, when actually, they are trying, but failing, because they do not have the strength of will to accomplish their desire.

The point of Holy Communion is to give medicine to the sick, so such a person is precisely the one who should commune, with as much preparation as their weak will allows them to, under the guidance of their confessor. In time, if they approach the chalice with fear and expectation, they will get stronger.

If you are unable to commune for some long-standing reason, ***keep coming to confession, and do whatever you CAN do***. Anything you do, even if it seems to be a “little thing” to you and you are embarrassed to be “repeating the same sins over and over”, will help you, and is definitely at least an effort at repentance.

Sometimes we need to “want” to repent before we repent. Or perhaps we even need to “want to want to repent”. A terrible mistake that those who are enmeshed in some difficulty or sin, such that they are unable or not allowed to commune is to give up on the small things they CAN do, even if they cannot do what they feel they should be doing. With effort, even what seems to be a small effort, comes eventual success, as long as you do not just give on everything because you feel unworthy.

The confessor is even more important for such a person, who needs guidance and encouragement.

2. All “rules” for preparation for Holy Communion **MUST** be understood as “general rules”, **under the guidance of a confessor**.

There are some hard and fast rules. If you never want to confess, ***ever***, or accept the guidance of one of God’s priests, ***ever***, then you definitely ***should never*** commune! Certain other things are obvious to some, but not to others.

We are proud creatures, and **we think we know stuff, when we really don’t**. The way this ignorance comes to light is when we humble ourselves and seek counsel, and over time.

Do not decide to go to communion, or to not go to communion on your own!

This is a very difficult lesson for modern man, because our culture is polluted with a sense of enlightenment, and ruinous self-reliance. Don't fall into this trap. Fight it!

Humble yourself, and accept the church's way of doing things, and you will be much more peaceful. You do not know a better way to prepare for communion than the church does.

This does not mean that you collect a list of 27 "rules" that you slavishly follow. Doing this without counsel is just another form of self-reliance. Talk to your confessor. Do not treat him like a holy guru (but his priesthood is holy) who knows all mysteries, but submit to his authority in a healthy way, and everything will be as it should.

Perhaps one may ask "what does **submit to your confessor in a healthy way**" mean? This is a difficult question to answer. If you have a healthy confessor, he will be sure that your submission to his authority is healthy. This is one of those things that you will know when you experience it. This is an important subject that is too big for this little tract, but I must leave you with at least something:

"One of the signs by which a layman can recognize his spiritual Father is this: a spiritual guide is not longing to give anyone advice; on the contrary, he knows that of himself he is empty and incapable — as even Elder Makarios wrote: "I have told you nothing that is an invention of my own. All of what I say comes from the writings of the Fathers. Mine is only the humble work of choosing passages suitable to your particular case."

Similarly, Bishop Ignatios says that the Fathers forbid us to give advice to our neighbor of our own accord, *without our neighbors asking us to do so*. The voluntary giving of advice is a sign that we regard ourselves as possessed of spiritual knowledge and worth, which is a clear sign of pride and self-deception.

How many spiritual Fathers today can withstand such a test? Yet, there may be a handful. Such true spiritual guides give advice with fear of God and only because it was asked of them; knowing their own grievous inadequacies, they do not expect instant obedience, but leave it to the judgment of their spiritual child. In this way they protect both themselves and their spiritual children.

The spiritually mature layman, however, knows that if he obeys his spiritual Father in all things that do not conflict with the Law of God or his God-given common sense, God will not at all abandon him."³

A person cannot learn about healthy submission without the help of God, and of course, *his effort* to submit to another human being regarding his sins. As the scripture has said, "this is a hard saying"⁴, and very few are able to do this. May God help you and guide you.

3. Fasting is generally a part of preparation for Holy Communion.

Since the chief thing we must do to prepare for Holy Communion is try to live a Christian life, **we should fast according to the typikon of the church** (that is, according to the fasting rules for various days of the year), **and according to our strength, and always under the guidance of our confessor.**

Any confessor has *many* fasting rules for different people, depending on their spiritual maturity, physical health, zeal and strength of will.

In our day, there is much misunderstanding about fasting. Many people see our fasting tradition to be any or all of the following:

1. Fasting is not applicable to lay people, but only to monks.
2. Fasting is only done during short parts of the year, and usually with accommodations to our *apparently* difficult modern life – for instance, abstaining from meat on the first week of Great Lent and Holy Week.
3. Fasting is obligatory for three days, or perhaps a week before receiving Holy Communion, but usually not at any other times.
4. Fasting is a set of arbitrary rules, which have little or no application to daily life, but a person feels “bad” when they do not fast, which is a good part of the time.
5. There is one fasting rule for everyone, and it is too hard to do, so in essence, fasting is not attempted, except perhaps in the case of #3, above.
6. Some are even influenced by sectarian ideas and believe fasting is some sort of attempt to be “saved by works”.

None of these things is remotely true. Fasting is a way of life; it is the way to life. It is not arbitrary rules that make us feel “bad” when we do not follow them. If the reason for fasting is understood, it is immediately apparent that it is not just a set of arbitrary rules. It is also not a set of optional rules. It has never been “only for monks”.

An explanation of fasting is not part of the scope of this document, so the interested person, included the one “who has trouble fasting”, should talk to his confessor. Of course, if his confessor does not fast (and there is no medical reason), he should find another confessor!

4. Typical preparation for Holy Communion includes *prayer at the evening service*.

In our parish, on Saturdays, this is Vigil, consisting of Vespers and Matins and the First Hour. It is about two and a half hours long, and contains detailed and exalted, intricately theological prayers of praise, supplication and thanksgiving, all interwoven with the theme of the Resurrection, and its implications, since every Sunday of the year is a commemoration of the resurrection.

The principle here of “**if you can do something, you must do it**” surely applies here.

Some people have the strength to attend the whole vigil regularly, and they benefit greatly from this practice. Others have varying levels of strength, but if they follow this all important Christian principle, they will grow in strength.

Practically, a person should not commune unless they have attended Vespers at a minimum.

In general, the confessor must be aware of why you were absent from the evening service if you wish to commune.

I have allowed many to commune who have not attended the evening service, if as, the petition in our ectenia says they were “absent for honorable cause.” There are honorable reasons to be absent, such as work, or some family needs, distance, health, etc.

I am well aware that we live in an “all or nothing” culture. Evening attendance would surely increase for some mysterious reason if I only served Vespers. If I did this, then nobody in our church would ever be benefited by matins, which in my opinion is the most important service of the week. You can attend a service that is not served! People are sometimes embarrassed by leaving a service early, and allow their vanity to keep them from coming to a portion of a service. Put your silly and self-destructive embarrassment aside, and talk to your confessor, and do what you are capable of. If your confessor does not serve on Saturday, then you need a new confessor!

If you only have the strength for Vespers, then come to the Vespers portion of the vigil. Please be aware that God gives us strength, so getting bored or tired does not mean that you do not have the strength- it means that you get bored or tired. The more you can push through these sorts of things the more peace you will eventually gain. It is always good to not make assumptions. Talk to me! If you need to confess, in the case in which you attend only Vespers, you would need to confess before Vespers (4-5 pm) or make an appointment with me for confession Sunday morning.

5. Sometime before Divine Liturgy, you should say the “Pre-communion” prayers⁵.

They are in any complete prayer book. They begin with some psalms, then a canon, then some pre-communion prayers from various saints.

This prayer rule is easy for some and very difficult for some. If it is hard for you, then split it into pieces. For instance, say the canon Saturday morning and the other prayers Saturday afternoon, or evening, or say a part on Saturday and a part on Sunday morning. It is even possible to split the rule up over some days throughout the week.

As in all things, if you have trouble with this rule, talk to your confessor.

There is a custom among some to say a very long rule in addition to the “pre-communion” prayers. Among Russians, this is called the “Pravilo” (or rule). It consists of three canons which are combined, and an Akathist⁶. Usually the canons are the ones in a typical complete prayer book – “To our Lord Jesus Christ”, the Supplicatory canon to the Theotokos, and the canon to the Guardian Angel. The Akathist is usually to Christ or the Theotokos. There is some variability in the canons and Akathist that are said.

This is an excellent rule to follow, and clergy usually observe it. I have known some lay people to observe it also, but I have never required it of anyone. I am more interested in getting people to come to confession and the evening service regularly, and this rule is too big for someone who is not accustomed to attendance at vigil.

PLEASE DO NOT SAY THESE PRAYERS DURING THE CHURCH SERVICES.

If you have not completed the prayers before liturgy starts, it is appropriate to talk to me. Do not just assume. I am easy to talk to and lenient in person, but I cannot help you, challenge you or encourage you if you do not talk to me about your problem completing the prayers. The services are for our communal worship. This may take extra discipline on your part, but you can do it. There are creative ways to deal with the length of the prayers. All you need to do is talk to me if you have trouble completing the prayers because of their length, your lack of time or energy, or being unaccustomed to longer personal times of prayer.

6. On the evening before Holy Communion, we should not behave as if it is just another day.

We should prepare ourselves for an awesome mystery (and attendance at the evening service, and the pre-communion rule are important for this). It is not an appropriate time for parties, and movies and entertainments, especially if they are instead of attendance at the evening service.

7. It has always been Christian tradition that a man and wife abstain from sexual relations on the evening before Holy Communion.

This was even the case in Old Testament times before important events. The reason we observe this important tradition is because marriage is an IMAGE of the love of the bridegroom (Christ) for the church, and therefore, of how we should love God. An image is inferior to the prototype, so we abstain from sexual relations, which are inferior to our love for God.

There is *not a shred* of feeling that sexual relations are in any way not a holy thing, in their proper context.

We live in a time when self-restraint is at low ebb. A couple who sacrifices their “Saturday night”, an “American tradition”, but not an Orthodox one, will benefit greatly.

8. Confession is part of preparation for Holy Communion⁷.

The frequency of confession is dependent on the individual, and the confessor. Certainly, if one has not been to confession for a long time, they should have confession before they commune.

The three active principals in confession are self-examination, repentance, and forgiveness of sins. This tract cannot go into all details of confession, but citing the Apostle Paul is apropos:

Whosoever shall eat this bread and drink this cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and then let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

The church provides a very safe way for self-examination and useful repentance, to help us to fulfill the admonition of the Apostle.

When confessing to another human being, in the context of a grace filled conversation which includes the priest, the one confessing and Christ, it is easier to avoid the lies we easily tell ourselves when we are alone. These are rarely conscious lies – they are the result of ignorance, borne of our pride and overall spiritual blindness. It is much safer to consider spiritual things with a mentor – a confessor. In addition to a more complete self-examination, the one confessing often receives useful advice which will help them to conquer the sins they wish to repent from.

Again, it must be stressed: **It is not correct to determine YOURSELF that you are unworthy of the mystery of the Eucharist. This is the assigned task (from God!) of your confessor.**

Come to confession as often as possible, and you will come to appreciate the spiritual “safety” of such a practice.

I greatly desire that everyone in my flock confesses at least monthly.

9. If we are truly to prepare for communion, we must understand what it is.

This is impossible for mortals to completely understand, but we can make a good start by attendance at the evening service, observing the “pre-communion” prayers, and meditating upon the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John

I am that Bread of Life. Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the Bread which cometh down from Heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die. I am the living Bread which came down from Heaven. If any man eat of this Bread, he shall live for ever; and the Bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily I say unto you, unless ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the Last Day. For My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He that eateth My flesh and drinketh My blood dwelleth in Me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent Me, and I live by the Father, so he that eateth Me, even he shall live by Me. This is that Bread which came down from Heaven, not as your fathers ate manna and are dead; he that eateth of this Bread shall live for ever.⁸

10. Preparation for Holy Communion includes (not an exhaustive list!)

- Fasting according to the typikon of the church, under the guidance of the confessor.
- Prayer in at least a portion of the evening service.
- Saying the Pre-Communion prayers.
- Fasting from all food in the morning of liturgy, under the guidance of the confessor.
- Husband and wife should abstain from sexual relations the evening before liturgy.
- A quiet evening before liturgy, without movies, parties, etc.
- Arriving on time to liturgy.

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¹ This document is a list of ten (more or less) things about a particular topic. More “Ten Things” topics may be found at <http://www.orthodox.net/10things>. They are also posted to the blog of [St Nicholas Orthodox Church, McKinney Texas](http://www.orthodox.net), called “[Redeeming the Time](http://www.orthodox.net/redeemingthetime)” – <http://www.orthodox.net/redeemingthetime>. Look under the category “10things”. Use anything you wish, but please indicate authorship, **with the URL**.

² Triodion p. 549 Matins Canon Irmos, Ode III, taken from an unpublished term paper by Reader Nicholas Park: “The Eucharist”, Spring 2008

³ “[Obedience and the Layman](http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/layobedience.aspx)”, Father Alexey [now Hieromonk Ambrose] Young,
<http://www.orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/layobedience.aspx>

⁴ “Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?” (John 6:60 KJV) This was said regarding out Lord’s assertions about Himself being the “bread of Life”, that is, what we call the Holy Eucharist. The scripture has many “hard sayings”. May God help us to hear them, and follow them, even if we also have fear.

⁵ These prayers are usually said the evening before or the morning that Holy Communion is to be received.

<http://www.orthodox.net/services/order-of-preparation-for-holy-communion.rtf>

<http://www.orthodox.net/services/order-of-preparation-for-holy-communion.pdf>

<http://www.orthodox.net/services/order-of-preparation-for-holy-communion.html>

⁶ The Canons (and Akathists) for Holy Communion

<http://www.orthodox.net/services/canons-for-communion.html>

<http://www.orthodox.net/services/canons-for-communion.pdf>

<http://www.orthodox.net/services/canons-for-communion.rtf>

⁷ Here is a good article about confession and communion: <http://www.orthodox.net/articles/confession-and-communion.html>

Here is a lot of material about confession: <http://www.orthodox.net/confess/index.html>

⁸ John 6:48-58