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The Receiving of the Divine Communion - Spiritual Need, Habit or Personal Choice

Abstract

One can notice that in the early life of the Church, the believer received the Body and Blood of Christ not only based on his having a moral life but also on his being permanently living a life of awareness of God in Jesus Christ's Church. Thus, the receiving of the Divine Communion represents a spiritual need and a personal choice to the extent to which man has become a servant of



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Christ, state through which he can live true freedom and can express his free will. Reducing the Divine Communion to a simple ritual practice leads to habit, and self-examination is replaced by habit. Here intervenes the difference between the state *with worthiness* (ἀξιῶς) and *with unworthiness* (ἀναξιῶς), as it is known that the Divine Communion works according to man's spiritual condition: in other words, it cleans those who clean themselves and brings light to the souls of those looking for the Light and the living in Jesus Christ, but it also burns the unworthy ones. Consequently, partaking of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is not the commemoration of a divine commandment; it is living the mystery of the Divine Eucharist by experiencing God through the Divine Communion, which means reality and accomplishment of the aim of the Divine Liturgy, which is to deify the believers, as it is shown by the prayers of the *Order of Holy Communion*.

Keywords

Church, Divine Communion, Jesus Christ, Eucharist, Deification

1 The Divine Eucharist – the Food of Eternal Life

The condition of member of Christ's Body means the believer's participation not just to the prayers and the divine services of the Church, but especially his partaking of Christ's Body and Blood¹. The Holy Fathers state that through the participation to

¹ Ἱεροθέου, Μητροπολίτου Ναυπάκτου καὶ Ἁγίου Βλασίου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας κατὰ τὶς προφορικῆς παραδόσεις τοῦ π. Ἰωάννου Ρωμανίδη, τόμος Β΄* (henceforth: Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική, Β΄*), Ἐκδόσεις Ἱερᾶ Μονῆ Γενεθλίου τῆς Θεοτόκου (Πελαγίας), 2011, p. 379.

the *Divine Liturgy*, the believer offers a *worship by the reason* (λογική λατρεία), in order for God to offer him *the worship by the mind* (νοερά λατρεία)². Yet, this *worship by the mind* is lived to the extent to which man works on the exercise of his noetic energy, as man must not pray only using his reason and thinking but also using his mind and heart. For this reason, man ought to have the prayer of the Holy Spirit in his heart, turned into an uninterrupted prayer³ by the work of the divine grace and characterized as being the prayer of the mind or of the heart. Consequently, this *worship by the mind* is the gift of God made to man and a sign with a double significance: 1) that the respective believer has the joy of the examination of the Holy Spirit; 2) that the respective believer is a temple of the Holy Spirit, a state conferring him, according to the Holy Fathers of the Church, the quality of member of the Church⁴.

This state is experienced especially through the communion with the Body and Blood of Christ, fact which represents the heart and the aim of the celebration of the *Divine Liturgy*, but also of the other Holy Mysteries, because Christ has said: “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you*” (John 6: 53)⁵. Thus, man receives the Holy Mystery of Baptism and that of Chrismation so that, as a member of the Church and a limb of Christ’s body, he may partake⁶ - through the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist - of the Body and Blood of Christ, which represent “*the aim of our*

2 On the sense of the living of these two states that the believer has or at least should live during the participation to the *Divine Liturgy* see Ioan Romanidis, *Teologia patristică* (Father John Romanidis, *Patristic Theology*), translation from Greek into Romanian, notes, bibliographic extras and afterword by Ion Marian Croitoru (henceforth: Romanidis, *Teologia patristică*), (Târgoviște: Editura Bibliotheca, 2012), pp. 29-30, 33-35, notes 15 and 28.

3 Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 380.

4 Ibidem.

5 Idem, p. 379.

6 Ibidem.

whole life and hope”⁷, because the receiving of the Most Venerable and Divine Mysteries is “unto the forgiveness of sins and eternal life”⁸.

Consequently, the Divine Eucharist “becomes the gift of the New Life”. Just as there is “no life without food”, similarly “there is no new life without new food and this new life being the life of Christ, Christ Himself is the One who becomes the gift of food”⁹. Referring to Himself, Christ calls this food “the true bread”, “the bread of God”, “the bread which comes down from heaven”, “the bread of life”, “the living bread” (John 6: 32, 33, 35, 41, 51). Moreover, Christ says that “he who eats” this bread, namely His Body and Blood, “has eternal life” (John 6: 51, 54), in other words, he inherits the Kingdom of Heaven or eternal life, which are given through the Divine Eucharist, called by the Holy Fathers “immortal food”¹⁰. Saint Symeon of Thessalonica teaches that the lack of participation to the Divine Eucharist means “death”, “because this is for you life, health, power and food for eternal life”. By partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, the believer receives Him “as earnest” for eternal life, as “He will be there your life, your food, your light and your rest; and if you partake of Him here, you will receive mercy and will have even from here the first fruits of His life, and you will be with Him forever, and the enemies will run away from you because they will not be able to do anything against you, as you have taken

⁷ As it is highlighted in the *Preparatory Prayer of the Order of the Holy Communion*, included both in the *Divine Liturgy* of Saint John Chrysostom, and in that of Saint Basil the Great. See Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață. Desăvârșire creștină prin intermediul experienței liturgice (Liturgy and Life. Christian Accomplishment by means of the Liturgical Experience)* (henceforth: Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*), București, Editura Basilica, 2014, p. 105.

⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, p. 111.

⁹ Idem, p. 96.

¹⁰ Tomáš Špidlík, *Eucharistia. Leac pentru nemurire (The Eucharist. Remedy for Immortality)*, translated from Italian by Dominica Gotea, (Târgu Lăpuș: Editura Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006), p. 77.

with you the inextinguishable Fire”¹¹. But this reality is not lived without the accomplishment of certain premises, as he who receives the Holy Communion receives not just a part of Christ, but Christ in His entirety. This fact represents the mystery of Christ’s presence in man¹². Speaking about the Mystery of the Divine Communion, the Holy Apostle Paul also shows one of the necessary premises for the receiving of the Most Pure and Divine Mysteries: “self-examination” (I Cor. 11: 28). Yet, by this spiritual state one should not understand just a simple moral living, but the examination of the extent to which the respective Christian is truly a member of the Church, in other words, the extent to which he lives the state of member of the mysterious body of Christ, namely of the Church, or at least he is endeavoring to acquire the state of purification¹³.

In the patristic literature were mentioned the three states of man’s spiritual life, namely purification, illumination and deification, representing the axis that “has nourished the Orthodoxy and has preserved its coherence”. These states have been and continue to be experienced by the Saints of the Church, in other words by all those who live a spiritual life,

¹¹ Sfântul Simeon al Tesalonicului, *Despre faptul că toți trebuie să se împărtășească încontinuu cu înfricoșătoarele Taine, întrucât e lucru folositor mai presus de toate* (Saint Symeon of Thessalonica, *On the fact that all should continually receive the awe-inspiring Holy Communion, since this is the most useful thing of all things*), in *Împărtășirea continuă cu Sfintele Taine. Dosarul unei controversă – mărturiile Tradiției* (The Continual Receiving of the Holy Communion. File of a Controversy – Tradition’s Testimonies), introductory study and translation by deacon Ioan I. Ică jr., (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2006), pp. 446-447.

¹² Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β’, p. 381; Romanidis, *Teologia patristică*, p. 145; Protopresbyter John Romanides, *An Outline of Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*. *Ἐπίτομος Ὁρθόδοξος Πατερική Δογματική*, edited and translated with an Introduction and Bibliography by Protopresbyter George Dion. Dragas (henceforth: Ioan Romanides, *Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*), Orthodox Theological Library 1, Rollinsford, 2004, pp. 120-121.

¹³ Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β’, p. 382.

namely all those who have been healed noetico-spiritually. This is why, the Holy Fathers draw the attention on what man should become even since this life, showing that after the moment of the separation of the soul from the body, it is no longer possible for man to obtain his noetico-spiritual healing, namely the healing of his mind and the working of his virtues, “because there is no repentance in hell”¹⁴. Consequently, the Orthodoxy is not an anticipated living, but a real living of the Kingdom of God, as for the one who existentially goes through the Holy Mystery of Repentance and becomes transfigured by the receiving of the Divine Communion, namely lives this life in a way that pleases God, Christ’s words, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3: 2), become: “The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (Luke 17: 21)¹⁵. There is, therefore, a direct connection between the living of the state of repentance, the receiving of the Divine Communion and the presence of the Kingdom of God in the believers’ hearts. This is why, the exhortation of Saint Symeon of Thessalonica for the believers of his time, but also for those of our times, is: “Repent, at least in words, call the priest who has power, humble yourself, confess your sins and truly repent, because the Kingdom of Heaven will draw near you”, and this presence of the Kingdom of Heaven means “to be ourselves with God, and God to be with us”, namely “receiving the Holy Communion” and “doing it continually with attention and humility of the soul”¹⁶. Saint Macarius of Egypt states that just as God created heaven and earth for man to live in them, He also created man’s body and soul, as His abode, a

¹⁴ Ioan Romanidis, *Teologia patristică*, p. 52.

¹⁵ Sfântul Grigorie Palama, *Omilia 10. La a doua duminică a Păresimilor, despre vindecarea slăbănogului*, (Saint Gregory Palamas, *10th Homily. On the Second Sunday of the Lent, on the Healing of the Paralyzed man*) in idem, *Omilii (Homilies)*, vol. I, introduction by Father Galeriu, translation from Greek by Dr. Constantin Daniel, reviewed by Laura Pătrașcu and stylized by Răzvan Codrescu, reedited, București, Editura Anastasia, 2012, p. 105.

¹⁶ Sfântul Simeon al Tesalonicului, *op. cit.*, pp. 446-447.

truth of which the Holy Apostle Paul was convinced as well, who confesses that “*Christ was faithful over God’s house as a Son. And we are His house (Hebrews 3: 6)*”¹⁷. And this happens because, according to the Holy Fathers, Christ is purification for those in the process of purification, illumination for those in the state of illumination and deification for those living the state of deification¹⁸.

One can notice that in the primary Church, the Christian received the Body and Blood of Christ having not just a moral life, but also always having what could be called a living in the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ’s Church¹⁹. Therefore, the receiving of the Most Pure and Divine Mysteries represents a spiritual need and a personal choice to the extent to which man has become the servant of Christ, a state by which he lives true freedom and the expression of his free will. Reducing the Divine Communion to a simple ritual practice leads to usage, and self-examination is replaced by habit. Here intervenes the difference between the state *with worthiness* (ἀξιῶς) and *with unworthiness* (ἀναξιῶς), as it is known that the Divine Communion works according to man’s spiritual condition: in other words, it purifies those who are purifying themselves and brings light to the souls of those looking for the Light and the living in Jesus Christ, but it also burns the unworthy ones²⁰.

Consequently, partaking of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is not the commemoration of a divine commandment; it is living the mystery of the Divine Eucharist by experiencing God through the Divine Communion, which means reality and

¹⁷ Serafim Alexiev, *Leacul uitat. Sfânta Taină a Spovedaniei* (The Forgotten Remedy: the Holy Mystery of Communion), translated from Bulgarian by Gheorghită Ciocoi and Petre-Valentin Lică, București, Editura Sofia, 2003, p. 12.

¹⁸ Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β’, p. 382.

¹⁹ This state is identical with that of illumination, which the Christian ought to live as a permanent reality, see Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β’, pp. 382-383.

²⁰ Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β’, p. 384.

accomplishment of the aim of *the Divine Liturgy*, which is to deify the believers, as it is shown by the prayers of the *Order of Holy Communion*²¹. In this sense, the Holy Fathers of the Church have said: “*God became man for man, so that man might become god*”²². This state of deification is not acquired by the simple participation to the *Divine Liturgy* and the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, but supposes a permanent preparation in order to attain and maintain the states of purification and illumination, so as to live the experience of Saint Symeon the New Theologian²³, confessed in the *Seventh Prayer of the Preparatory Prayers for Holy Communion* in the *Order of Holy Communion*, where he states that the one partaking of Christ’s “*Mysteries*”, which are “*the most pure and the all-holy*”, “*is being deified and made alive*”, if he receives them with “*clean heart*”, “*trembling thinking*” and “*humble soul*”²⁴. Based on the reality of this transformation and of the living of the state of deification,

²¹ Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρικὴ Δογματικὴ*, Β', p. 384. This *Order of Holy Communion*, which contains *Canon of Preparation for Holy Communion*, *Preparatory Prayers for Holy Communion* and *Thanksgiving after Holy Communion*, shows that the Church has always highlighted the importance of the believer's personal preparation for his drawing close to the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist and his receiving of the Divine Communion (Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, p. 106).

²² Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, p. 139. For instance, Saint Athanasius the Great has stated that Christ “*became incarnate, so that we be deified*” (idem, *Cuvânt despre întruparea Cuvântului / Discourse on the Embodiment of the Word*, in idem, “*Scrieri. Partea I*” (Letters. Part 1), translation from Greek, introduction and notes by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Părinți și Scriitori bisericești* 15 (Church Fathers and Writers, 15), București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1987, p. 151).

²³ Ioan Romanidis, *Teologia patristică*, p. 125.

²⁴ *Rânduiala Sfintei Împărtășiri (Order of Holy Communion)*, in *Carte de rugăciuni pentru trebuințele și folosul creștinului ortodox (Prayer Book for the Needs and the Use of the Orthodox Christian)*, printed with the blessing of His Beatitude Father Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, without year, p. 208.

at the heart of the apostolic succession there is not just the successive cheirotonia inherited from the Holy Apostles, but also the true teaching on the spiritual life, namely on the reality of deification. *“The interruption of the tradition of theosis (deification) implies a separation from the Apostolic Succession, namely, from the communion of the Mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection and incurs falling away from the truth”*²⁵. By virtue of this statement, Father John Romanidis, who in the Greek Orthodox theology of the last century had a role similar to that of Father Dumitru Stăniloae in the Romanian Orthodox theology, draws the attention of the Orthodox world on a problematization: *“a conspicuous indication of this interruption of the Apostolic Succession is the absence of veneration of the Saints and of their holy icons and relics and also the absence of miracles wrought through them”*²⁶.

2 The Divine Eucharist – the Mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection

The liturgical practice regarding the preparation for and the receiving of the Divine Eucharist shows that the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist has been secularized. The Christians commune not always accomplishing the necessary premises or, in the best case, they only prepare themselves for the moment of the receiving of the Body and Blood of Christ by fasting and a formal confession of sins²⁷. However, the premises of the receiving of the Divine Communion are necessary as well to the Church servant (priest), not just to the believer. According to the Holy Fathers, the clergy has to always be in a state of spiritual readiness and progress in order to accomplish the

²⁵ Ioan Romanides, *Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*, pp. 120-121.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 384.

*Divine Liturgy*²⁸. Yet, in time, because of the spiritual decadence, the Church has taken several measures: it has formulated canons to indicate how the Christian should participate to the Divine Communion; it has established the service regarding the Mystery of the Holy Confession; it has imposed several modifications in the architectural structure of the church building and in the way prayers are read²⁹ etc.

For instance, specialized studies state that the iconostasis appeared as a result of this spiritual crisis. In the primary Church, the whole building was made up of one room and the prayers were said out loud, the catechumens having to leave the Church at a particular time. Yet, through the disappearance of the catechumens and following the homogenization of the believers who were no longer so preoccupied by the purification of their lives in the perspective of the participation to the *Divine Liturgy* and the receiving of the Divine Communion, the clergy began to serve out of the believers' sight [behind the iconostasis], as the believers were no longer considered worthy to see the whole development of the *Divine Liturgy*, while the prayers got to be read softly [by the priests in the Altar, while the believers sing complementary prayers in the Church], this being due, on the other hand, to the crystallization of an atmosphere of mystery, characteristic of this divine service³⁰.

The Mystery of the Holy Confession concerns both the one who confesses his sins, but also the clergyman who received the laying of the hands (cheirothesia) in order to accomplish this

²⁸ Without intending to challenge anyone in particular, we need to admit that the Holy Fathers recommend that the servants of the Church, namely the clergy, should be in a state of illumination in order to serve the *Divine Liturgy* (Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 385). Unfortunately, this state is ignored more and more nowadays, both by the servants of the Church and by those who wish to become servants of God at the Holy Altars.

²⁹ Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 385.

³⁰ See Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 385.

Holy Mystery. On this occasion, he needs to teach to the believer the teaching of the Church and give him the necessary advice leading the believer to the obtaining of the state of purification and determining him to live an authentic Christian life. Consequently, the father confessor is not just a person giving advice on family and social matters, then reading the prayer for the forgiveness of sins, because he needs to be, first of all, the person living the prayer of the mind or of the heart³¹, in order to help the penitent to get to live, in his turn, the same spiritual state.

From this perspective, nowadays the parishes of the Romanian society need, maybe more than ever, a well-delineated pastoral program, which should necessarily include catechesis in general and especially mystagogical catechesis, helping every Christian to acquire a beneficial living of and participation to the *Divine Liturgy*. The need for this pastoral program comes from the unity noticed between dogma, prayer, divine services, asceticism and the Divine Eucharist, in other words, between the teaching of the church, the states of the spiritual life (purification/κάθαρσις – illumination/φωτισμός – deification/θέωσις) and the Divine Eucharist. Everything in the Church is meant for the believer's participation to the Mystery of the Divine Eucharist, considered by the Holy Fathers "*the mystery of all the mysteries*" or "*the mystery of the Church*"³², and the receiving of the Lord's Body and Blood, for Christ to become

³¹ Ἱεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 386.

³² Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, pp. 71, 110. When and how the Honorable Gifts turn into the Divine Gifts remains a mystery, for the simple reason that all the attempts of explaining what happens in the Divine Eucharist by means of lexical terms (substance, accident, trans-substantiation etc.) or of describing the time (the moment of the transformation etc.) "*are inadequate and useless (unserious), for the very reason that they attribute to the Eucharist categories of 'this world', while its true nature resides in the transcending of these categories, in our introduction into the dimensions and the reality of the 'new age'*" (Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, p. 98).

purification, illumination and deification for each member of the Church. The Mystery of the Holy Confession is a means by which the believer is freed from the sins he has confessed and is forgiven those sins, but also a means for him to receive the teaching he needs in order to acquire the states of purification and illumination. In this way, the participation to the Divine Eucharist leads to spiritual accomplishment and to the living of the state of partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1: 4), through the work of the uncreated grace and the partaking of Jesus Christ's deified human nature³³, which means growth in the work of virtues and living the state of being cleansed of the sins (2 Peter 1: 8, 9).

Through the cultivation of these states, the whole assembly of believers ought to commune, because: 1) the whole assembly³⁴, representing the body of the local Orthodox Church, is praying "with a mouth and a heart", which is why the whole synaxis of the believers says "Amen" at the end of the Eucharistic prayer³⁵; 2) the whole Church body is called to commune with God³⁶; 3) the Divine Eucharist is the "mystery of the unity"³⁷ and of the

³³ Ioan Romanides, *Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*, pp. 120-121.

³⁴ *Divine Liturgy* means "common prayer of the Church", which is why the so-called "private liturgies" are foreign to the spirit of the Orthodoxy (Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, p. 73).

³⁵ Ἰεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 379; Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, p. 103. Actually, each parish, through the multitude of its activities and its liturgical life, represents the whole sobornic (catholic) Church, just as the sobornic (catholic) Church is present in its entirety and is the same in every parish in turn (Romanides, *Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*, pp. 120-123).

³⁶ Ἰεροθέου, *Ἐμπειρική Δογματική*, Β', p. 379.

³⁷ Christ is the One Who becomes, according to the testimony of Saint Basil the Great in the *Divine Liturgy*, the believers' life and unity: "And unite all of us to one another who become partakers of the one Bread and Cup in the communion of the one Holy Spirit..." (Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, pp. 110, 113). Christ does not content Himself with a simple dwelling in the one who partakes with Him, but unites that person with Him, making that person be "one body and one soul with

gathering of the Christians in the Church³⁸. We should mention that the moment of the believers' receiving of the Holy Communion used to have a community-related and liturgical meaning in the practice of the Church, yet in our times the believers' assembly has become "*a body that does not commune*", and the fact of the uninterrupted "*participation*" has been replaced by that of a "*frequent attendance*"³⁹. The life of the Church is in and with Christ, which is why this life is focused on the Divine Eucharist, namely on the believers' participation to the Mystery of their co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ, because by communing with Christ's Body and Blood, the believers become partakers of the Mystery of the Cross and of that of Resurrection⁴⁰. This truth is confessed in the prayer of Saint Basil the Great from the *Divine Liturgy*, read by the priest when the Divine Gifts are consumed:

"The mystery of Your saving providence, O Christ our God, has been accomplished and perfected as far as it was in our power;

Him" just as He Himself confesses: "*He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him*" (John 6: 56).

³⁸ The Christians' assembly does not represent a simple group of weak and sinful people, but a group to whom "*it was given the power to be the Church, to fully represent the Church in this place and in this time, to manifest its real life as life of Christ*" (Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, p. 74).

³⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, p. 111.

⁴⁰ Ioan Romanides, *Orthodox Patristic Dogmatics*, pp. 122-123. In the divine service of the Orthodox Church, the events of the history of salvation "*are re-actualized and all those who participate to them are taken into them. In this way, Christ crucifies Himself for me, as well, and I crucify myself together with Him, He is buried for me, as well, and I bury myself together with Him, He is resurrected for me, as well, and I am resurrected together with Him*". "*The same reality is experienced during the celebrations of the saints. The participants to the service... become martyrs together with the martyr, confessors with the confessor, devouts together with the devout, fasters with the faster*" (Viorel Sava, *Studiu introductiv (Introductory Study)*, in: Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, pp. 10-11).

*for we have had the memorial of your death. We have seen the type of Your Resurrection. We have been filled with Your unending life. We have enjoyed Your inexhaustible abundance, which in the age to come, be pleased to grant to us all*⁴¹.

3 The frequent or rare receiving of the Divine Communion from the perspective of pastoral life

The analysis of the testimonies preserved concerning the life of the Church during the first centuries indicates the fact that the Divine Eucharist has represented ever since the beginnings of Christianity the heart of the Church service, as an accomplishment of the commandment of our Savior Jesus Christ: “do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22: 19), so that the partaking of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ was the most important moment in the believer’s life. It can be noticed, therefore, that those who participated, in the primary Church, at the *Divine Liturgy*, communed on all the Sundays and celebrations throughout the year, this practice representing the official rule of the Church, while the daily receiving of the Holy Communion (according to Acts 2: 42, 46) was seen as an exception from this rule, having a local character and being determined somehow by special situations, such as a special act of religious zeal⁴².

The mentions of some canonic provisions of the Church (the 9th apostolic canon, the 2nd canon of the local synod of Antioch, held in 341 etc.)⁴³, which obliged all those who participated at the *Divine Liturgy* to receive the Holy Communion and, at the

⁴¹ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, p. 116.

⁴² Ene Braniște, *Liturgica Specială (Special Liturgics)*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1980, p. 395.

⁴³ Ioan N. Floca, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe (The Canons of the Orthodox Church)*, Sibiu, 1993, pp. 13, 207.

same time, condemned those that did not receive the Holy Communion, both those who left before the moment of the Holy Communion, and those who remained until the end of the *Divine Liturgy*, indicate that the believers' desire to receive the Holy Communion had begun to decrease. It has been stated that this state of fact had been determined, on the one hand, by the multiplication of the liturgical days during which the *Divine Liturgy* was celebrated, while the believers were no longer able to get ready for the Holy Communion every time, and on the other hand, it was due to the increase of the believers' responsibility towards the Divine Mysteries⁴⁴. Consequently, the number of the believers who would draw close to the Holy and Divine Mysteries gradually began to diminish, their receiving of the Holy Communion becoming increasingly rare, and attaining the critical situation of our times, when, during the *Divine Liturgy*, more often than not, only the ordained servants of the Church receive the Holy Communion, while the believers, in an increasingly large number, receive the Holy Communion only at the great feasts of the ecclesiastical year, especially during the Holy Easter period.

It is very true that the Church has always exhorted the believers to approach the Divine Mysteries only after the preparation that each believer needs, a preparation from which the Holy Mystery of Confession is not missing. In practice, it can be noticed that the receiving of the Holy Communion by the believers has become a phenomenon not so often encountered in their life. Yet, from the Church's recommendation of preparation to the reality met today in the parishes of the Orthodox Church in Romania, when during the *Divine Liturgy*, when the priest utters the words "*With fear of God, faith and*

⁴⁴ Nicolae. D. Necula, "Cât de des trebuie și pot să se împărtășească credincioșii?" (How often must and can the believers commune?), in idem, *Tradiție și înnoire în slujirea liturgică (Tradition and Renewal in the Liturgical Service)*, vol. I, Galați, Editura Episcopiei Dunării de Jos, 1996, p. 191.

love, draw near”, no believer answers this call to the receiving of the Body and Blood of Christ, there is a great gap, the situation becoming worrying, on the one hand, and unnatural, on the other hand, since the very aim of the *Divine Liturgy*, namely the receiving of the Most Holy and Divine Mysteries by the believers, is no longer fully accomplished.

In the past of the Church, the discipline regarding the believer’s receiving of the Holy Communion was characterized by local customs, so it was not identical in all the Church, and mentions concerning what one could call obligatory “deadlines” for receiving the Holy Communion cannot be found in any ecclesiastical regulations or norms, the believers’ partaking of the Divine Communion being left up to their free will, determined by their desire and moral-spiritual state. Indeed, it is known that Saint Symeon of Thessalonica exhorted every believer who loves the Lord to commune at least every 40 days, yet this was not an obligation, but a recommendation, since he also exhorted the believers:

“continually delight the communion⁴⁵ in the confession⁴⁶, in the piercing of the heart and the devoutness of the soul and none of those who fear and love the Lord should partake of the Holy Communion less often than every 40 days, but depending on their power and awareness [attention] they could also more often receive the partaking of Christ, even every Sunday if possible, especially the old and the sick, because this thing is for us life and power”⁴⁷.

Yet, since, as time went by, the above-mentioned recommendations have no longer been observed, the Church considered it useful to make others, included in the *fourth*

⁴⁵ Namely the partaking of Christ’s Body and Blood.

⁴⁶ That is to say the Holy Mystery of Confession.

⁴⁷ Sfântul Simeon al Tesalonicului, *op. cit.*, p. 446; see also Ene Braniște, *op. cit.*, p. 396.

commandment of the Church, according to which each believer should receive the Holy Communion “*during each of the four fasting periods of the ecclesiastical year*”, and, if this is not possible, then “*at least once a year, during the Lent*”⁴⁸. Thus, the commandment shows that if we are concerned by our spiritual growth, we should commune during the four fasting periods of the year, which, however, does not exclude a more frequent receiving of the Holy Communion. These recommendations can be found as well in the advice of the Romanian edition of the *Ieratikon (Liturghier)*, as follows: “*And the parish priests (it is true that those living in monasteries, in the past just as today, receive the Holy Communion more often than the secular believers, a fact shown as well by the appearance of the Liturgy of the pre-sanctified Gifts in the liturgical life of the Church⁴⁹) should teach their parishioners to get ready to commune, with a clear conscience... if possible, during the Church celebrations, and, if not, necessarily during the four fasting periods of the year*”⁵⁰. However, it should be mentioned that these recommendations, namely of the *fourth commandment* of the Church and of the *Ieratikon (Liturghier)*, exhort to a minimum needed regarding the receiving of the Divine Communion, but those who wish and get ready for it, by “*preparing their bodies and souls in advance*”, can commune more often. In this sense, the *Ieratikon (Liturghier)* further explains:

“And if they should want to draw close to the Holy Communion also outside the four usual fasting periods, let them fast seven days beforehand, spending their time in prayer... (and this, not in time of need, as, in time of need, it is allowed to fast only three

⁴⁸ “Cele 9 porunci bisericești” (The Nine Ecclesiastical Commandments), in *Carte de rugăciuni pentru trebuințele și folosul creștinului ortodox, ...*, p. 168.

⁴⁹ Ene Braniște, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

⁵⁰ *Liturghier (Ieratikon)*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 2000, p. 471.

days or even just one day) and get ready in advance, according to order, through the confession of sins"⁵¹.

Therefore, the receiving of the Holy Communion should not be reduced only to the fasting periods, but can also take place outside them, according to the above-mentioned recommendation. In agreement to what has been mentioned above is the recommendation of Saint George, abbot of Cernica Monastery, to the dwellers of this Monastery, which can also be applied to secular believers, namely that of monthly communion:

*"... like a father, I advise you: do not let any month go by without communing with the divine Mysteries but all together commune 12 times a year, except for other unavoidable reasons. As, although in the Scriptures there are here and there great liberties and here and there great restrictions, namely some receiving the Holy Communion more often, and others at great spans of time, waiting for years, I nevertheless advise you, my dear sons, not to be led astray by choosing things over your powers, nor by considering yourselves with those who are always worthy of the Holy Communion or with those who delay it too much, but as I have often told you, keep the golden mean, accomplishing according to your power the necessary preparations, and, after three days of fasting in a row, draw close to devoutly receive the purifying Mysteries from the holy priest"*⁵².

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² "Viața și Diata stareșului Gheorghe" (*The Life and the Testament of abbot George*), in *Viețile, povățuirile și testamentele sfinților stareși Gheorghe și Calinic de la Cernica* (*The Lives, the Advice and the Testaments of the Holy Abbots Gheorghe and Calinic of Cernica*), Sibiu, Editura Deisis, 1999, pp. 83-84. It is not excluded for this recommendation of Saint George to have been "a possible echo of the one expressed in the very popular book 'Mântuirea păcătoșilor' (*The Sinners' Redemption*)..., adaptation by monk Agapios Landos of Crete (1580/1585-1665)" of a Roman-Catholic work, see Ioan I. Ică jr,

Consequently, based on what has been presented in this part of the study, but also on the observation of the degree of awareness concerning the liturgical life, certain necessary remarks can be made. First of all, it should be noted that without the Divine Eucharist, one cannot talk about an authentic communion of every believer in turn with Christ and with His Church, which is the Mystical Body of Christ. Actually, all the gifts received through the work of the other Holy Mysteries become accomplished and more working through the Divine Eucharist. Secondly, having in view the existential problematic of the contemporary man and the missionary realities of the Church in the contemporary world, the desire to return to the practice of the primary Church concerning the weekly communion faces different obstacles, as some express the fear that such an approach would lead to a diminution or a neglect, in the best situation, of the preparation that each believer needs to respect, as a concrete preoccupation for acquiring the purification of our conscience and heart in order to commune, a fact that can be noticed, more or less, in different local Orthodox Churches.

Sure is the fact that the situation encountered today in the Orthodox Church in Romania is not at all satisfactory, so that a reevaluation of the importance of the Divine Eucharist in the life of the believers and of the Church is absolutely necessary. The thing we should tend to, at least for the moment, regarding the improvement of the situation concerning the believers'

“Împărtășirea continuă pro și contra – o dispută perenă și lecțiile ei” (The Continual Communion: For and Against – A Perennial Dispute and its Lessons) (henceforth: *Ică jr, Împărtășirea continuă*), in *Împărtășirea continuă cu Sfintele Taine. Dosarul unei controverse – mărturiile Tradiției* (*The Continual Partaking of the Divine Mysteries. The File of a Controversy – the Testimonies of Tradition*), introductory study and translation by deacon Ioan I. *Ică jr.*, Sibiu, Editura Deisis, 2006, pp. 80-81, note 90.

participation to the *Divine Liturgy* through the receiving of the Holy Communion⁵³, as an accomplishment of its aim, should be to have as many believers as possible communing, during the ecclesiastical year, at all or almost all the *Liturgies*. It is an ideal, we think, a realistic one, which can be attained and which would lead to a rebirth of the believers' and the ecclesial community's state of communion⁵⁴. Maybe a pastoral-catechetical program, as the above-mentioned one, especially insisting on the mystagogical catechesis, could be really helpful, a program in which to underline in a clarifying way that the Holy Mystery of Confession is not related to a fasting period, as the believer can come to confess his sins whenever he feels the need to do it, and he does not have to wait for a certain period of the ecclesiastical year to confess his sins. Consequently, according to the recommendation of the *Ieratikon (Liturghier)* invoked above, it must be underlined that the Divine Communion can also be received outside the four great fasting periods of the ecclesiastic year, with the necessary preparation and the blessing of the spiritual father. At the same time, a pastoral program on spirituality and the participation to the Holy Mystery of Confession, well organized and cultivated with responsibility, eventually not just during the first and last week of the fasting period, would lead to the creation of a spiritual atmosphere able to make the work of this Holy Mystery fruitful and useful. Such an approach would allow the possibility to go over the formal, more or less, realization of the Holy Mystery of Confession, as it is found that most of the believers confess their sins either at the beginning or at the end of the fasting periods, which inevitably leads to the appearance of non-conformities in the carrying out of the respective Holy Mystery. In the

⁵³ See Petre Vintilescu, "Sfânta împărtășire în spiritualitatea creștină. Deasă ori rară împărtășire?" (The Holy Communion in the Christian Spirituality. Frequent or Rare Communion?), in: *Studii Teologice (Theological Studies)*, anul V, nr. 5-6, mai-iunie, 1953, pp. 382-406.

⁵⁴ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, p. 111.

development of this program, a good use should also be made of the Orthodox “awareness-awaking” and “illumination” teaching promoted by the “Kollyvades”⁵⁵, who have set as their goal “*the existential recovery on the ethos level of the liturgical-ascetic-mystical experience lying at the heart of the patristic and apostolic Tradition of the Orthodox Church*”⁵⁶.

Therefore, we think that the adequate answer to the question “*How often should the believer commune?*” would be: whenever he feels the need to commune, yet every time with preparation through prayer, fasting and permission from the spiritual father, according to Saint Paul’s exhortation:

“whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the Body and Blood of the Lord. Let each man scrutinize himself, and thus let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner, without discerning the Body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor. 11: 27-29).

Actually, the fear that we could receive “*with unworthiness and therefore towards a sentence*” the Body and the Blood of Christ is often expressed in the prayers of the *Divine Liturgy*, and in the *Order of Holy Communion*⁵⁷, yet this state of unworthiness should be understood leaving aside any false piety. There are priests who refuse a more frequent communion of the

⁵⁵ The first generation of “Kollyvades”, such as Neophytos Kavsokalyvites and Saint Athanasius of Parios, “*have represented the polemic avant-garde of this religious revitalization trend*”, and the “Kollyvades” of the second generation, such as Saint Makarius, bishop of Corinth, and Saint Nikodemus of Mount Athos, “*shall articulate a vast program of encyclopedic recovery and spiritual anchoring of the whole Tradition in an inevitably modern context, setting themselves the goal of conquering for the Orthodoxy the individuals’ interiority and subjectivity*” (Ioan Ică jr, *Împărtășirea continuă*, p. 23).

⁵⁶ Ioan Ică jr, *Împărtășirea continuă*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, pp. 104-105.

believers, limiting their “access” to just four times or even once a year. This practice represents “false piety and false humility”, “it is actually human pride” and “an erroneous interpretation of the Holy Apostle Paul’s exhortation: let each man scrutinize himself (1 Cor. 11: 28)”⁵⁸. The meaning of his words is, according to Father Alexandru Schmemmann, the exact “contrary: the communion – becoming our food, the essence and the source of our life in the Church – is now what we should accomplish and make not become our condemnation”⁵⁹. In other words, through the exhortation to peace and the calling to the bowing of the heads⁶⁰, the believer is invited to submit, so that “the only valid, traditional and real Orthodox approach of the communion is that of submission”, expressed so beautifully and simply in the preparatory prayers: “I am not worthy, Lord and Master, to have You come under the roof of my soul’s home. But, since You, as a lover of men wish to dwell in me, I take courage to approach. Command me [...]”⁶¹. Father Alexandru Schmemmann concludes that this state of drawing near and communing with the Body and Blood of Christ represents “submission to God in the Church”, as the Church is one “that arranges the celebration of the Eucharist”, and this interpretation and perception of our state of unworthiness through the prism of humility and submission “shall be an important step forward in our understanding of the Church, when we realize that the ‘Eucharistic individualism’, that transformed 90% of our Liturgies into Eucharists without people” willing to commune, “is

⁵⁸ Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, p. 108.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

⁶⁰ During the *Divine Liturgy*, the priest says “Peace to you all” and then, “Bow your heads unto the Lord” (Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, p. 108).

⁶¹ “The 9th prayer of Saint John Chrysostom”, in *Carte de rugăciuni pentru trebuințele și folosul creștinului ortodox*, ..., pp. 211-212; Schmemmann, *Liturghie și viață*, pp. 108-109.

the result of a distorted piety and of a false humility”⁶². Yet, we should mention that this submission does not exclude repentance and the confession of sins⁶³, on the contrary, through them, the believer is purified and joins his unworthiness with the state of cleanliness and humility, opening his heart to Christ, Who knocks on everyone’s door (Apoc. 3: 20), thirsty to come into it.

Therefore, it is necessary to defeat the “liturgical nominalism”, “clerical ritualism and formalism”, “theological rationalism of a scholastic type on the background of a moral laxism, religious illiteracy and increasing indifferentism in the secular and clerical masses lacking any kind of catechesis and torn apart from the living sources of faith”⁶⁴. This reinvigoration of the liturgical life, in the spirit of the Holy “Kollyvades” Fathers, and the realization of the spiritual usefulness of the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ bring to light: a) the preceding ascetic preparation through the Holy Mystery of Confession, fasting and prayer, yet without falling into an “ascetic rigorism”, which leads “to an asceticism without Eucharist and an overbid of the substitutive value of the anaphora”, triggering “indifference and indolence towards the Eucharist and an overbid of one’s personal ascetic efforts”⁶⁵; b) the so-called practice of “terms/deadlines” (Romanian: “soroace”) does not have its ground in the Holy Tradition of the Church; they deal with local practices and cannot prevail over the holy canons and the Holy Tradition⁶⁶.

⁶² Alexander Schmemmann, *Liturgie și viață*, p. 109. The fighting off of the false humility is supported as well by the Kollyvades, see Ică jr, *Împărtășirea continuă*, pp. 35-36, 38, 48.

⁶³ Serafim Alexiev, *op. cit.*, p. 15. A sincere confession, with humility and a meek heart, brings peace of conscience and warmth of heart, which, renewed by the love to God, make man’s whole being overjoyed (*ibidem*, p. 86).

⁶⁴ Ioan Ică jr, *Împărtășirea continuă*, pp. 23, 49.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ During the 14th century, the Patriarch Philotheus II Kokkinos (1354-1355, 1364-1376) reminded, among other things, to the monks of

The priests' concern during this age of history should be related to the restoration of the apostolic ethos, lived and transmitted in the Church, namely to the reinvigoration of the paschal ethos, which is, at the same time, eucharistic, ascetic, martyric and missionary. The awareness of this dimension of the liturgical life will help the believers live the exhortation of Saint Ambrose of Milan: "*let your life be so as to be worthy of receiving [the Holy Communion] every day!*"⁶⁷.

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Mount Sinai, who were divided into two camps, one supporting the obligation of receiving the Holy Communion frequently without fasting, the other requiring a fasting of at least three days and a receiving of the Holy Communion only once in 40 days, that the number of fasting days was not appreciated by the Church, being left to the spiritual fathers' appreciation, "*who, to the healthy ones, prescribe more fasting and to the weak ones, less [fasting]*". On the other hand, "*neither the Church, nor the holy canons, nor the Tradition mention that the Christians should commune every 40 days and that they ought not to commune earlier than every 40 days*" (Ică jr, *Împărtășirea continuă*, pp. 74, 76).

⁶⁷ Sfântul Ambrozie al Milanului, *De Sacramentis* V, 4, 25, PL 16, 452 (Saint Ambrose of Milan, *On the Mysteries*), apud Ică jr, *Împărtășirea continuă*, p. 88.

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*τὶς προφορικὲς παραδόσεις τοῦ π. Ἰωάννου Ρωμανίδου, τόμος Β΄,
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