

HOW DO WE CELEBRATE THE EUCHARIST (THE DIVINE LITURGY)?

by Father Tadros Yacoub Malaty

The Eucharist is a festive occasion. During each Divine Liturgy (Eucharist), believers - clergy and lay people - joyfully celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, which continually works in their lives. They therefore celebrate without interruption the resurrection of the Lord Christ who dwells in their hearts.

I remember the first Eucharist I celebrated at St. George's Church in Sporting, Alexandria, took a long time. Afterwards, when I met the late "uncle Sadek," who led a celibate life that was dedicated to practical evangelism and I told him the Liturgy took a long time today, tears filled his eyes and he asked me, "How could you say that? Who is worthy to share in the Eucharist?!" He then continued, "I wish that we could spend all our lives celebrating the Eucharist!"

It was customary for "uncle Sadek" to quietly rush home after the departure of the Angel of the Oblation. He would then lock himself in his private room for an hour or more, so that he would not meet anyone because the Lord Christ was within him! Thus his life was a continual feast because of his attachment to the Eucharist, giving him great peace and glorious joy beyond description!

This was the feeling that we had during our childhood. The Eucharist had its own joy in family life; thus, families used to clean their homes every Saturday in preparation for the joyful weekly feast: Sunday, or participation in the Eucharist. Together with these outwardly preparations, there are internal preparations for the soul to receive the groom as in a wedding.

As I previously stated, the Eucharist is a unique journey, in which the believer, from the moment he leaves his home for church, puts himself under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit to possess, support, and embrace him in order to ascend the path to heaven - meaning through the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ - step by step until the believer comes closer to God and meets the Holy Trinity. The soul rejoices because of God and refuses to leave Him, saying with St. Peter the Apostle, "Lord, it is good for us to be here" (Matthew 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33).

What a fearful time it is, as the church prepares to be in God's presence with the Cherubim, the Seraphim, and all the heavenly beings, and to present to the Father what is dear to His heart, the sacrifice of His Only Son, the Redeem the whole world.

During the Eucharist, it is as if we leave, not our homes, but our concerns and weekly problems, bringing and putting them at the feet of our Christ, Who fills our life with His glorious joy and gives us His rest.

We are frequently asked the following questions:

Why don't we feel that the Eucharist is a journey to heaven?

Why does our mind wander during the Eucharist?

Why we feel that the Eucharist takes a long time?

First: We cannot separate our celebration of the Eucharist from our daily life. For if our Christ has first priority over our time and thoughts, we begin our day early with Him and end our day with Him ... we continually call on Him wherever we are, even in our daydreams and during our sleep ... therefore our souls rejoice during the Eucharist. We will feel that during the Liturgy our heart, thought, and all our inner self are elevated to heaven.

In the past, Jews used to prepare themselves for a full week before Passover, avoiding leaven (yeast) in their homes. We should similarly prepare ourselves all our days to rejoice in our union with Christ by avoiding the leaven of evil. St. Paul the Apostle said, "Therefore let us keep the feast not, with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:8).

Second: By practicing repentance daily, we feel the need for our Savior Who forgives sins with His precious blood, and the Eucharist becomes a sincere wish to receive the Savior. Our thoughts, senses and feelings are absorbed in Him.

Repentance, as Lord Christ said, is the way to His Kingdom. It makes us, who are sinners, worthy to partake of communion. The lack of repentance is a barrier to starting on the joyous path to His Kingdom.

Third: The believer, who reads the Bible at home every day, feels his soul elevated like a bride who is united with the groom; in this case, the groom is the incarnate Word of God. During the Eucharist, the believer enters the Groom's home, comes to know His mysteries, rejoices in Him, and finds in the Liturgy a true wedding feast with all the senses.

Fourth: The congregation participates with the clergy in celebrating the Eucharist. The Divine Liturgy is a service for the whole church, clergy and lay people, praying together both in soul and mind as Paul the Apostle tells us (1 Corinthians 14:14); thus it is important for us to celebrate the Liturgy in a language that is understood. This is especially true for the children of emigrants.

During the Eucharist, it is befitting that the faithful participate in the praising, thanksgiving, and petitioning as they realize that they are in the company of heavenly beings and are sharing in their praises. They must also be concerned for the whole world, believers and unbelievers alike, praying for the salvation of everyone, spiritual growth, and their union in both faith and love.

Fifth: The Church was accustomed from early times, both in the East and the West, to celebrating the Eucharist while fasting as spiritual preparation for receiving Body and Blood of our Lord.

Perhaps some may ask if the Lord Christ and His apostles fasted?

As the Word of God became incarnate, He willfully surrendered to natural law as He did to the written Law. He even accepted bodily circumcision and practiced worship as one of us; He observed the Sabbath not by the letter but with good deeds and love towards others. The Lord Christ and his disciples were fasting on Maundy Thursday when the Lord Christ established the sacrament of the Eucharist for the following reasons:

1. Since the days of Ezra, every Thursday was a day of fasting and prayer for Moses began his fast on a Thursday in preparation to receive the Ten Commandments and the Law. The people under Moses' leadership fasted every Thursday, in remembrance of receiving the Law. Is it not proper for us to fast in preparation to accept the Word Himself and receive His Body and His Blood which permeate us?! We receive, not the stone tablets of the Law, but the Word Himself!

2. The Lord Christ and his disciples were fasting, not only because it was Thursday, but because it was necessary for every Jew, who was unable to participate in the service of the temple, to fast for four days before Passover, not eating or drinking until sunset.

3. In remembrance of the salvation of the firstborn of the Jews when the angel of the Lord killed the firstborn of the Egyptians during the night of the Exodus, each firstborn Hebrew had to strictly fast on the day of the Passover. Because the Lord Christ was considered a firstborn, according to the Hebrew tradition he was fasting. If the Lord Christ asked his disciples to pray and fast to overcome demons (Matthew 17:21), shouldn't we first fast in preparation to rejoice in He who gives us victory and triumph?! If fasting was one of the principal elements in the preparation for Passover (fasting, praying, confessing sins with true repentance of heart, and offering sacrifices to God), it is befitting for us to fast in preparation to rejoice in the Body and Blood of the Lord, our Passover, Who was slaughtered for us. Because the Lord Christ and His disciples fasted, we find that all the early churches stressed the need for fasting with repentance and confession in preparation for this great sacrament. Only the sick and those unable to fast are exempted.

Sixth: It is necessary for us to leave our homes with our father Abraham to go to the land, which he wanted us to see - meaning his sacred altar. We leave behind our land, our people and our father's home - meaning that we forsake every worldly concern or problem in order to open our inner senses to see the incomparable heavenly mysteries of God, and our hearts could love the whole world through Jesus Christ.

How beautiful it is to pray before leaving our homes and on our way to church, asking God to drive away all fragmentation of our thoughts, so that we can direct ourselves totally towards God with complete concentration.

Seventh: It is befitting for us to come early in the morning to the Lord as Abraham got up early in the morning to offer his beloved son Isaac as a burnt offering to the Lord. Let us hurry to go to the house of the Lord without delay for He gave us an appointment and is waiting for us. He is truly patient, for He waits for us even when we come late, but we may be considered careless if we do not have a real excuse.

Eighth: As we enter the Lord's house, we ascend with Moses the prophet, not up the mountain to receive the Law on stone tablets, but to partake of His life-giving Body and Blood and we remain there until He commands us to leave, so that we do not insult the One Who is with us.

You entered the church and were deemed worthy to be in Christ's company, do not leave before you are permitted to do so, or you will be asked for the reason and considered a deserter. St. John Chrysostom

Ninth: The church's codes include:

No one must leave the church without necessity from the reading of the Holy Bible until the offering of the oblations, the blessing of the priest, and the permission to leave.

Pray with awe and in fear, and not with arrogance or for pleasure (showiness).

Stand quietly with purity in the church to hear the Word of God.

No one should speak in the church.