

## You Are What You Eat

*O Christ! Great and most holy Pascha! Wisdom, Word and Power of God! Grant that we may more perfectly partake of You in the never ending day of Your Kingdom! (Liturgy of St. Basil and St. John Chrysostom)*

What does it mean to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist?

As a eucharistic community, we gather on the day of Resurrection (Sunday) and feast days to celebrate the heavenly banquet. The fact that the Eucharist is an on-going celebration for Orthodox Christians and not something limited to certain times of the year points to its essential place in the life of the Church as a community and in the life of each member of the community. For centuries, the frequency of receiving Holy Communion was reduced to once a year, usually during Great Lent. This practice was firmly established until about 25 years ago when the normal practice of the Church which encouraged receiving Communion several times a week was recovered.

From one perspective we can say with certitude that receiving the Eucharist frequently is an indication of a positive restoration in the life of the Orthodox parish. Yet any positive restoration in the life of any Orthodox parish implies that the people making up the local community are constantly being influenced and formed by the living Tradition of the Church. Father Dimitri Staniloae, an Orthodox theologian of the Church in Romania, develops this idea: "one can say that the personal spiritual life does not develop in isolation from the eucharistic community. In turn, the eucharistic community does not stand outside the influence of the spiritual state of those persons who compose it... granted that it is Christ who acts in the liturgy of the community and in the spiritual life of those who compose it."

This statement of Father Staniloae is very helpful in examining our own approach to the celebration of the Eucharist both corporately and personally. The dynamic between community and person sets the tempo and standard for how we live as Christians. This implies that if the life of the parish involves virtually the entire community receiving Holy Communion on any given Sunday or feast day, there should be a corresponding spiritual development or maturity of the communicant and the parish.

The interrelationship between the Christian community and the Christian is a reality that is often overlooked or downplayed. When this happens we grow accustomed to thinking that "my" relationship with God is a private matter and has no connection to those with whom "I" pray. Starting with the Old Testament we see that God forms a community (a clan, a tribe or a nation) whose very purpose for existing is to carry out His will corporately and personally. Taking into account the eucharistic community, the life of the community affects the life of each person and the life of each person affects the life of the community. No one stands as a solitary individual. The interrelationship and interpenetration of one life into another can be either for mutual spiritual growth or for the spiritual stagnation and ultimately spiritual disintegration.

When we speak or hear about the "spiritual life," there is often the misunderstanding that spiritual things are opposed to material things. For those of us who participate in the Eucharist the "spiritual life" is the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Quoting St. Macarius of Egypt, Ss. Callistus and Ignatius (14th c.) in advising those who practice the Jesus Prayer write: "As wine penetrates all the members of the body, so that the wine is in man and man is in the wine; so likewise he who drinks Christ's blood is filled with the divine Spirit who spreads through the whole soul, so that the soul is totally in Him and, thus sanctified, becomes worthy of Christ our Lord. For the Apostle says: '...all were made to drink one Spirit' (1 Cor 12:13). In the same way those who

truly partake of bread in the Eucharist are granted participation in the Holy Spirit and these worthy souls have eternal life."

These words, found in the Philokalia, express the profound spiritual reality that when we participate in the Eucharist, God includes us in His divine life. By the divine initiative, the celebration of the Eucharist forms the context in which the Holy Spirit enters our lives and fills us with the eternal and divine life of the Father. The Holy Trinity shares this divine life with us corporately and personally, and likewise we are to share this life corporately and personally with each other.

But if our life is to be in harmony with the divine life, i.e., if our wills are to conform to God's will and our energies to God's energies, the Eucharist cannot be conceived as an end in itself. The Eucharist does not stand by itself. Our celebration of the Eucharist presupposes that we have died and risen with Christ. The link between Baptism, Chrismation and the Eucharist is not accidental. Conversion, prayer and repentance (which must include Confession) clearly occupy an essential place in the eucharistic life of the community and each person.

Without prayer and repentance being part of the communal and personal life, a false spirituality develops, a spirituality which keeps a certain form or style but has at its core an antagonism to God's will. The living Tradition of our Church teaches us that our antagonism to God's will is overcome when we die and rise in the baptismal waters. From these waters and our participation in the Eucharist, the words of St. Paul reach their maturity: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17).