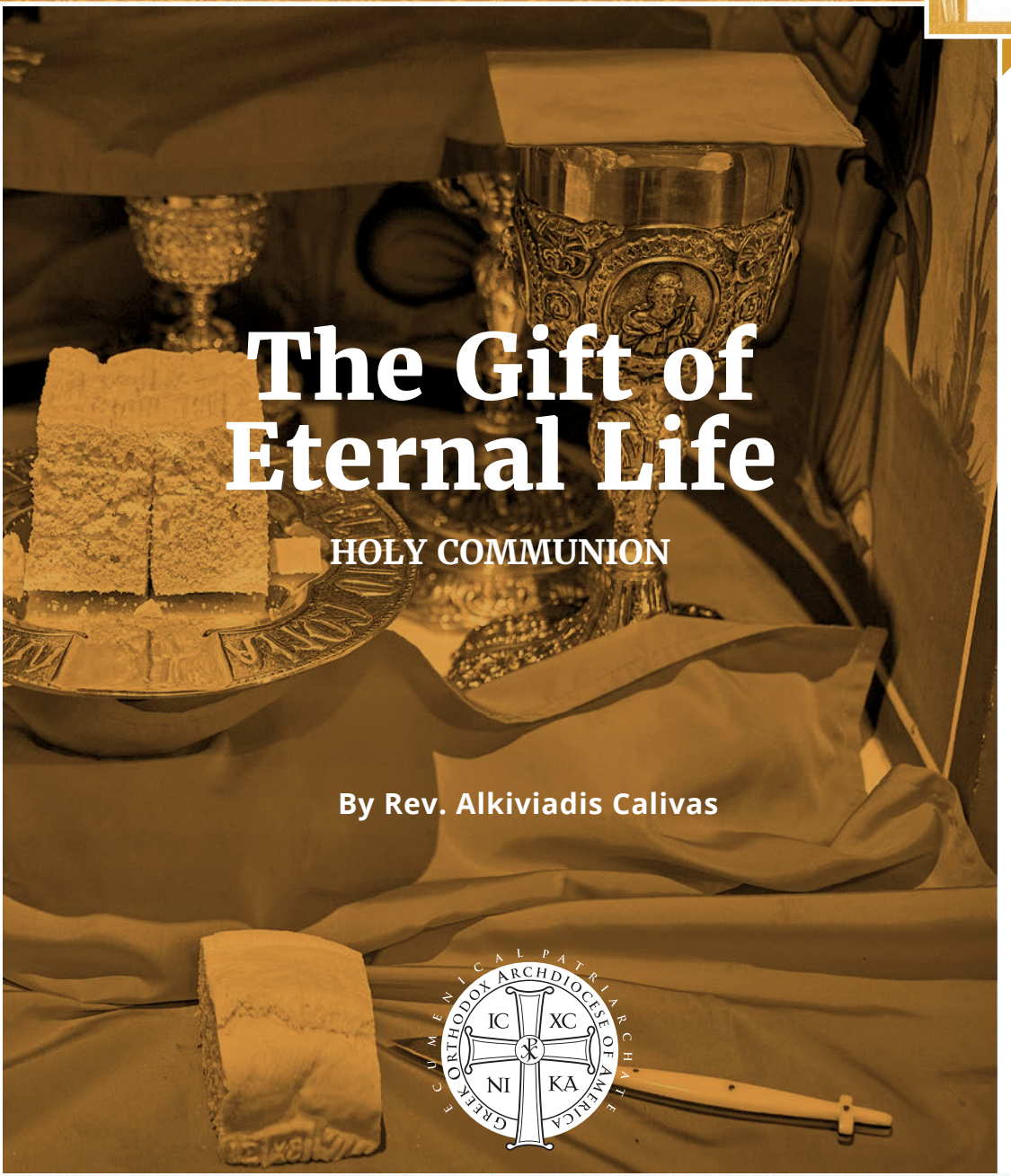
SACRAMENTS



The Gift of Eternal Life

HOLY COMMUNION

By Rev. Alkiviadis Calivas

Orthodox Christianity Faith & Life Series



The Eucharist Cannot Be Abandoned

Documents on the lives of saints often contain information on Christian life, liturgy, and doctrine. One document from AD 304, during the persecution of Christians by Emperors Diocletian and Maximian, is an eyewitness account of the trial of a group of Christians. Of interest is the testimony of two of those martyrs, Saturninus and his son Felix, about the Eucharist. The Roman proconsul addressed the following question to Saturninus, the priest and leader of the group of Christians.

"Did you, contrary to the orders of the emperors, arrange for these persons to hold an assembly?"

Saturninus replied, *"Certainly. We celebrated the Eucharist."*

"Why?" Asked the proconsul.

"Because the Eucharist cannot be abandoned." The proconsul immediately ordered him to be tortured.... Then Felix, a son of Saturninus, came forward. The proconsul inquired, *"I am not asking you if you are a Christian. You can hold your peace about that! But were you one of the assembly, and do you possess any copies of the Scriptures?"*

"As if a Christian could exist without the Eucharist, or the Eucharist be celebrated without a Christian!" answered Felix. *"Don't you know that a Christian is constituted by the Eucharist and the Eucharist by a Christian? Neither avails without the other. We celebrated our assembly right gloriously. We always convene at the Eucharist for the reading of the Lord's Scriptures."* Enraged, the proconsul ordered Felix to be beaten with clubs.

This testimony of the two ancient martyrs bears repeating because it highlights the meaning of the Eucharist to the faith community and to each of its members. *"The Eucharist cannot be abandoned,"* they said, because *"a Christian cannot exist without the Eucharist, or the Eucharist be celebrated without a Christian."* "A Christian," they affirmed, "is constituted by the Eucharist and the Eucharist by the Christian."

The Eucharist: The Central Activity of the Church

The celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord's Day is an indispensable activity of the Church because the Eucharist constitutes the Church as the Body of Christ. It is the source of her life, the supreme act of thanksgiving and a sacrifice of praise.

At the Divine Liturgy, the Church is changed from a human community into the Body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the holy People of God. The life of every parish and of every faithful Christian is centered on the Divine Liturgy. It is there that we experience the mystery of the reality that God wrought through the incarnation of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist we personally encounter Christ—crucified, resurrected, and glorified. Through the Divine

Liturgy Jesus fulfills his promises: *"Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there I am in the midst of them... And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age"* (Matt. 18:20 and 28:20).

The Divine Liturgy is more than texts, words, songs, and ritual acts. It is the meeting of heaven and earth. The Divine Liturgy communicates the meaning and purpose of life—through Word and Sacrament. It helps us to see, understand, interpret, and internalize both the tragedy of human sin and also the limitless potential of the new life in Christ.

In the Divine Liturgy we affirm our identity as members of the Church, the Body of Christ. We hear the Word of God, confess our common faith, we express our unity in love, and find eternal life. We receive Holy Communion "for the forgiveness of sins and life eternal." The seeds of immortality and holiness are sown in our hearts and we are sent forth to bear fruit commensurate to this wondrous Gift.

Through the Eucharist We Become Partakers of the Divine Nature

The Eucharist was instituted by Jesus Christ at the Last Supper to perpetuate the remembrance of His redemptive work and to establish a continuous intimate communion with those who believe in Him. Our weekly participation in the Divine Liturgy is not meant to fulfill a vague religious obligation, but rather that we may become *"partakers of the divine nature"* (2 Peter 1:4).

At the Divine Liturgy we are reminded that the Christian life is a work in progress. It is a life that is set on things above; that it is continuously moving from weakness to strength and from glory to glory. Salvation is neither the product of biological and historical evolution, nor the result of some ethical code of behavior. Salvation comes through a radical change, which the Scriptures describe as 'the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new." We were immersed into this radical change when we were baptized. The newness of life—the gift of Baptism—is constantly renewed by the Eucharist when partaken in faith.

In the Eucharist, we pass from death to life and obtain God Himself. By partaking of Holy Communion, divine life penetrates the fabric of our humanity. The future life is infused and blended into the present one. The Eucharist, as St. Ignatios of Antioch said, is "the medicine of immortality and the antidote against death, enabling us to live forever in Jesus Christ."

We receive Holy Communion with utter discernment, with humility and joy, not as a reward, but as the most precious gift of the Lord to the members of His Body. When we eat and drink worthily at the Eucharist, we are no longer clay or a heap of dust, but of the Body of Christ. For this reason the Eucharist cannot be abandoned because it constitutes both the Church and the Christian. The Eucharist is the food of life.

Holy Communion: The Food of Life

We have learned to equate food with life because food sustains our earthly existence. Of all the creatures that inhabit the earth, we alone prepare food for eating, like the baking of bread and the making of wine. In fact, some form of bread and some type of wine constitute the sustaining elements of life in every human society. Consequently, bread and

wine, the distinctive human food, have come to symbolize our mortal life.

We eat to live and speak of life in terms of food. But we also speak of life in terms of "flesh and blood." In fact, we cannot conceive of or know life except in terms of flesh and blood. It is not hard therefore for us to recognize almost immediately the significant correlation between bread and wine and flesh and blood, the language that permeates the Eucharist. When we think of bread and wine or of flesh and blood, we think of life. It is no accident that bread and wine mixed with water are central to the Eucharistic mystery. Nor is it accidental that Jesus, referring to His life, spoke of it as flesh and blood and identified His life at the Last Supper with the distinctive human food, bread and wine. At the Divine Liturgy, the Holy Spirit comes upon the holy Gifts—the bread and wine—to change them into the Body and Blood of Christ. God accepts the bread and wine of our offering. In return, He gives us His own Son, who acts to make us His own Body. Christ, the Bread of Life, transforms us who feed on Him in faith and assimilates us unto Himself, as He promised, *"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him"* (John 6:56).

That is why the Eucharist cannot be abandoned. A Christian cannot live without it. It conforms our manner of being and thinking. When Christ is in us, the law of love—the self-giving, unconditional, sacrificial ***agápê*** of God—becomes the inner principle, source, and guide of our life.

Holy Communion: The Manifestation of Selfless Love

In Divine Liturgy, Jesus calls His people to sit with Him at Table. At the Table of the Lord we are initiated into the corporate life of the Church. The Eucharist unites us to Christ and to one another as we pray, *"...unite us all to one another who become partakers of the one Bread and the Cup..."*

Let Us Depart in Peace

On this side of death every ascent requires a descent. So it is at every Divine Liturgy. We climb the ladder of divine ascent to be embraced by the love of God. We hear the words of life and partake of the Bread of life. Then, we "depart in peace." We return to the world and the affairs of everyday life, bringing the blessings of the Eucharist to our wounded and broken world. Having partaken of the Body of Christ, we tend to the needs of broken human bodies and spirits that are all around us, so that the light of God's Kingdom may shine in the darkness, bringing healing, hope, peace, justice, and joy to the hearts of people, until the Lord comes in glory. ✠

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