

# St. George Newsletter

September 2011

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## On the necessity of Communion

"I believe in God; I pray at home. Why should I go to church?" Priests often hear such questions. A complete answer to this question would require several pages. Today, we will discuss the main reason that church attendance is necessary.

In the Gospel of John, we read the following words of the Savior: "Unless you eat My Body and drink My Blood, ye have no life in you." We must go to church because prayer by itself is insufficient. Christ defeated death by His own death, and gives life to us through the sacraments of the Church. Of course even when we are not going to communion, we should be in church, but that is a subject for another day.

To be sure that Christ did not mean these words symbolically, we need only read further. "From that time forth, many of His disciples left Him." These disciples left, and Christ did not call out behind them, "Wait, you didn't understand..." This was no symbol. These were conditions for receiving new life. Some of the disciples understood this. "Then Jesus said to the twelve: do ye also wish to leave? Simon Peter answered Him: Lord, where will we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life." The apostles saw the most important thing: happiness is found in the seeking (and promise) of eternal life with God.

If we call ourselves Christians, we believe that Christ was the pre eternal God, became a true man without ceasing to be God, died, and rose again. You cannot argue with His words. So what prevents us for preparing for communion?

"I pray at home, and that's enough"

From above, we see that if a person believes the words of the Bible, it is not possible to believe that life is possible without communion.

2. "I am unworthy."

No one is worthy. During His earthly life, the Savior dined, spoke, and in all things associated with "the unworthy". God created us so that we could live in communion with Him. Probably, the problem is not about worthiness, but...

3. "I cannot (or don't want to) repent of my sins."

In order to approach communion, one must have a clean soul. We cleanse our soul in the sacrament of repentance. In confession, we admit our sins before God in the presence of a priest, who stands as a witness. We must not simply formally list our sins, but truly repent of them.

There are different kinds of spiritual illness. Some must be healed immediately. Others take more time. If a person is living in sin (cohabitation outside of marriage, adultery), this must be immediately stopped before coming to communion. It may be difficult to leave the situation. However, if a person strives to know himself, he himself will see that when he lives in unrepented sin, according to the words of the Savior, he has no life in him. Do we wish to make angels rejoice? Let us repent of our sins.

"But my children (coworkers) make me angry, and I know I'm just going to be angry again. What should I do?" Such spiritual illnesses - anger, selfishness, vanity, pride, laziness - are not often quickly healed. It is sufficient to hate these sins in oneself and commit to working on them.

4. "Every time I take communion, something bad happens."

Probably, when you don't take communion, something bad happens, too, and you just don't notice. You shouldn't expect a feeling of spiritual elation every time that you commune. Christ didn't promise good feelings - He promised that you will have life in yourself. He promised forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

5. "I can't (don't want to) read all the communion prayers."

Communion prayers are the prayers listed under "Preparation for Holy Communion" in the prayer book, and the three canons (to the Savior, the Mother of God, and the guardian angel). To read them all takes under an hour. Is it hard to stand while reading them? Sit down. You can't find an hour on Saturday? Read a canon on Wednesday, one on Thursday, one on Friday, and so on. If it is very difficult to complete the prayer rule, consult your parish priest. Maybe he will give a blessing for a shorter rule.

How often should one commune? With experience, a person knows himself, or can ask his parish priest. On the twelve great holidays of the Church, on Easter, and on one's names day, we relive the event being commemorated, and should thoughtfully and prayerfully repent and prepare ourselves for communion.

May God give us all the strength to struggle with temptation, by which the enemy of the human race desires to deprive us of communion with God.

## Holy Righteous Alexei (Mechev) of Moscow



Fr. Alexey was born in 1860, the son of a choir director in the service of the great Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow (†1867). The family lived in modest circumstances. "I never had a room of my own," Fr. Alexey recalled. "All my life I've lived with people around!" Judging from the only extant letter to his wife Anna, he was happily married; they had several children before her tragically premature death. None of the children appear to have remained close to their father with the exception of a son Sergius who succeeded Fr. Alexey as priest at St. Nicholas' church on Maroseyka street, before joining the ranks of Russia's New Martyrs in 1941.

Fr. Alexey's success did not blossom overnight. Describing the early years of his pastorate he said: "For eight years I served the Liturgy daily in an empty church. One archpriest said to me: 'No matter when I pass by your church, the bells are always ringing. Once I went in – nobody. Nothing will come of it. You're ringing in vain.'" But Fr. Alexey steadfastly continued serving and the people began to come, many people. He would tell this story when asked how to

establish a parish. The answer was always the same: “Pray.”

In his domestic life Batiushka was extremely simple and humble. In his study, in his little room, there were piles of books – some lying open, letters, lots of prosphora on the table, a folded epitachelion lying together with a cross and Gospel, and little icons. The general chaos indicated that Batiushka was always busy, that he never had spare time, that there was always waiting for him at home, on the street, in church – some great task calling for his love and self-sacrifice.

“Live for others, and you yourself will be saved.” This was Fr. Alexey’s motto. “To be with people,” he would say, “to live their life, rejoice in their joys, sorrow over their misfortunes.., herein lies the meaning and way of life for a Christian, and especially for a pastor.”

Fr. Alexey’s own life was consumed in the service of others. Outside his apartment the line of laboring and heavy-laden’ stood from early morning. And Batiushka managed to have a talk with each of them, to caress, to console. Never was he ever alone. He was always with people, and in sight of people; it was as though the walls of his room were glass – everything was visible.

Fr. Alexey often said that “each person has his own particular path to salvation. One mustn’t set a common path for everyone; one mustn’t try to workout a formula for salvation which would apply to all people. People are born with different natures, different abilities, intellects and constitutions – so, too, they each go towards Christ at their own pace, each on his own path.

Because of this, Christianity considers equally soul-saving the chaste monastic life and marital life, the priesthood and laity, the rank of soldier and the rank of judge – as long as Christ dwells in the heart. And the task of an elder or a spiritual father is to uncover a person’s calling and to point out to him the path which he should take towards the Lord.”

With his gift of clairvoyance, Fr. Alexey had no need to speak to his “patients” in order to

diagnose their maladies. And his “treatments” showed this masterful physician to be a man “not of words, but of spirit, of power”: “It seemed that Batiushka didn’t really say much; from his face alone, his smile, his eyes, there streamed such gentleness, such understanding, that this in itself comforted and encouraged a person without any words. ...He actually, as he himself put it, ‘unloaded’ people’s sins; he transformed people from despairing, oppressed pessimists into Christians constantly rejoicing in the Lord. One had only to glance at his commemoration book, checkered with hundreds of names of both living and dead, a book he always had with him, and one understood the words which he spoke, pointing to his heart: “I carry you all here.”

The scope of Fr. Alexey’s pastoral influence may be judged by the tens of thousands who gathered for his funeral. The liturgy was served by Bishop Theodore Pozdeyev (later, archbishop and New Martyr), attended by 80 clergymen – hierarchs, priests and deacons. The imprisoned Patriarch Tikhon, freed for a few hours, met the cortege at the St. Lazarus cemetery, where he served a lity for the deceased. Altogether, it was a fitting tribute to this remarkable pastor who had been, for so many, a stepping-stone to God.

## The cat

*Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevnukov)*

What can we say? People love to judge and criticize priests. Thus, it was most unexpected for me, when once, when I was serving in the Don monastery, a parishioner named Nikolai approached me and said, "Now I understand: the best, greatest, most patient and wonderful people in the world are priests!"

I was surprised and asked how he had suddenly decided this.

Nikolai answered, "I have a cat. A really good, clever, special, good-looking cat. But there's one strange thing about him: when my wife and I go to work, he jumps up on our bed, and, excuse me, poops on it. We have tried everything to stop this - we begged, punished - nothing worked. Once we made a barricade. But when I came home, I saw that the barricade was broken down, and the cat had again gone onto the bed and done its dirty deed. I was so angry that I took the cat and just beat it! The cat was so hurt, that it crawled under a chair, sat down, and cried. I tell the truth, it was the first time that I had ever seen tears drop from his eyes. Just then, my wife came home, saw it, and started in on me: "You should be ashamed of yourself! You're Orthodox! I am not speaking to you until you go confess before a priest your disgusting, bestial, unchristian behavior!" There was nothing left for me to do, and it was on my conscience, so in the morning I went to the monastery to go to confession. Abbot Gleb confessed me. I waited in line, and then told him everything.

Fr. Gleb, an abbot from the Holy Trinity-St. Servile monastery, was temporarily serving in the Don monastery, and was a very kind middle-aged priest. Usually, he stood to hear confessions, resting on the analogion with his beard on his fist, listening to the sins of the parishioners. Nikolai told him the whole story in detail, in all honesty. He tried not to hide anything, and thus spoke for a long time. Then when he finished, Fr. Gleb was silent for a moment, and then said, sighing, "Well... Of course it's not good. But I didn't understand: this

Copt [in Russian, the word "cat" sounds very much like the word "Copt"], who is he? Is he at the university? Don't they have a dormitory there?"

"What Copt?" Nikolai asked.

"Well, the one that lives with you that you were just talking about."

"And then I understood," Nikolai finished, "that Fr. Gleb, who was a little hard of hearing, humbly listened to me for ten minutes about the Copt that somehow lives in our apartment, poops on our bed, and whom I cruelly beat until he crawled under a chair to cry. Then I understood that the most wonderful and indefatigable, most patient and great people in the world are our priests."

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