

Suggestions for Partaking Communion In Extraordinary Circumstances

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Fr Abraam Sleman
frsleman@CopticChurch.net

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Introduction

In extraordinary times, society makes changes to daily life in response to extenuating circumstances. In a similar manner, the church can also make changes to her rites as she has done throughout its history. Any change should not contradict the faith in God and the belief in the essence of the Eucharist.

After studying many options, in the light of the Holy Bible, the writings of the Early Fathers and the holy Orthodox tradition, we found some alternative methods for partaking holy communion. These suggested methods are appropriate with the holiness of the sacrament and either they have been used before or still in use, in extraordinary circumstances.

Any of these methods may be followed in case that His Holiness the Pope, His Eminence the Metropolitan or His Grace the Bishop of the diocese, deems that any of these methods is suitable for the conditions of the local church.

The following are some clarifications of these methods and answers to some questions that may arise regarding them. I hope what follows will help in taking the appropriate decision.

The Dynamics of the Rites

At the beginning, before searching for such alternative methods, we should have in mind that rituals, in general, are subject to development according to circumstances and times. This happened for many rituals throughout the history of the church.

In the present time, there has been a development in the way to prepare the Holy Myron, taking advantage of modern technology by using essential oils and saving time. This method has been elaborated on by His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, may the Lord keep his life.

Recently, churches have requested that the expression of the “Holy Kiss” be merely by bowing the head to be touchless. Back in history, the Holy Kiss’ ritual had already evolved to be hand-touching rather than actual kissing.

Concerning the Eucharist, no one denies that the early church, in the days of the Apostles the Fathers, used to offer the body and blood separately as Christ did, and this is very evident according to what was mentioned in the Holy Gospels and in (1 Corinthians 23: 11-27).

At the beginning of the church history, and when the circumstances allowed, the Church continued to follow the ritual of the one liturgy in one church, with one bread, one cup, and one bishop presiding and celebrating the Eucharist.

After that, the number of the churches and the congregation have multiplied, many altars and liturgies have been established. The bishop was no longer the only one representing Christ who serves the Eucharist.

Celebrating the Eucharist, serving communion and many other rites have been delegated to the priest. Later on, the deacons have become partners with the priests in some rites.

The *First Apology* of St Justin the Martyr (110-165) provides one of the most detailed accounts of contemporary Christian practice. After the discussion of baptism, Justin describes the practice of the Eucharist. He mentioned that the deacons in his time were distributing the Eucharist to the people and they carried away a portion of the Eucharist to the absentees, whether sick or traveling¹.

Moreover, they used to send the Eucharist with the laities to the people in their homes, during the time of persecution.

St. Dionysius of Alexandria [264 AD], in his letter to Fabius, Bishop of Antioch, mentioned that a priest sent portion of the Eucharist with a boy to an old man on his deathbed, in the form of the Bread [the Holy Body], smeared with the wine [Holy Blood] and dried².

The way of partaking of the Holy Communion was not the primary concern of the early Church Fathers. Rather, the primary concern was getting ready to receive Lord's body and blood, and also the knowledge of the greatness of grace. The Songs of Songs portrays the longing between God and the soul as that between the bridegroom and the bride:

“I am my beloved's, And my beloved is mine. He feeds his flock among the lilies” (Song of Songs 6:3). “I am my beloved's, And his desire is toward me” (Song of Songs 7:10).

¹ Logos virtual library, *Apology of Saint Justin Martyr (110-165)*, Ch 65, Translated by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson,

² ANF, vol. 6, Dionysius the Great, *Epistle to Fabius Bishop of Antioch*: 11, p. 101.

“He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him” (John 6:56).

The rites of the church are always dynamic, but our faith remains the same, as stated. St Paul articulated our faith in the Eucharist, saying:

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16).

Notice that St. Paul says, “one bread” and “one cup” by the singular term. Yet we consider the “one bread” and the “one cup”, together as the “one living Body of Christ.”

In the same chapter (1 Corinthians 10), Saint Paul mentioned that the unity of the church is because of the fellowship in “One Body”.

Notice that the “One Bread”, mentioned at the end of the verse, is the Living Body of Christ, i.e. the Holy Body and the Blood (1 Corinthians 10:17).

In Christ we have become the servants of the New Testament, and not the servants of the letter, “for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” (2 Corinthians 3: 6).

It is true that we should offer communion in the most appropriate manner. But before that, we must believe in the essence of the Eucharist, and prepare the heart for it.

Cleaning the cups - as the Pharisees used to - was not something wrong in the eyes of Jesus Christ. But, He did not accept just the literal cleaning of the cups without cleaning the heart (Mark 7:6-8).

Eucharist is not only the moment of distributing and receiving communion. It is worship and ministry of the entire congregation together.

They offer the Eucharist with the priest to God the Father through the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose Holy Body and Blood are present on the Holy Altar.

This living celebration concludes inside the church with receiving communion but continues in the life of the believers as new persons in Christ.

Abiding In Faith With the Dynamics of the Rites

Recommending alternative methods for partaking of Holy Communion”, is based on the principles declared by the Lord Jesus:

“If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:7-8).

"Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat, except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?"

And He said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:25-28).

Accordingly, the rites are for serving man, and not the man for the service of the ritual. This meaning has been emphasized by our beloved Father, His Holiness Pope Tawadros II, and many eminent metropolitans and bishops.

Compassionate fatherhood entails dealing gently with everyone in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 1 Corinthians 9:22).

The compassionate fatherhood does not imply compromising the Church's faith and belief. It should be within God's commandments (Galatians 1:10), “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3), and “all things be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Searching for an alternative method for partaking of holy communion is not a compromise of belief and faith. We should distinguish between our faith in the essence of the Eucharist and the method of serving communion, as can be changed.

Although we believe that the body and blood of the Lord is for the forgiveness of sins and for eternal life, the way to approach the sacrament may lead to eternal life or may lead to weakness, disease and death, according to the way we approach the sacrament (1 Corinthians 11: 29-30).

There is a human role to deal with the mystery of life, including believing in the essence of the sacrament, repenting, and reconciling with others, as well as how to approach the sacraments.

Eucharist is fellowship with God the Father through the Holy Body and Blood of Jesus, placed on the sacred altar. It is much greater than mere tools and rituals.

The servants of the Spirit, not the servants of the letter, are those who begin living today in the eternal kingdom of God and eternal life, through liturgy and the Eucharist (2 Corinthians 3: 6). God the Father is looking for the true worshipers who worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

Partaking the Holy Body With the Blood

The Coptic Orthodox Church allows the priest to serve the Holy Body and Blood together for the sick.

Until recently, some of the elderly priests used to serve them together to the entire congregation of the church, and not for the sick only, until this method of communion was prevented as there was no necessity at the time. Also, to this day, infants and some patients are only given the Holy Blood.

In all of these cases, there is no doubt that they received the living body of Christ, regardless of how they are offered to them.

There is no objection to serve the Holy Body and Blood separately, in an appropriate way. The Lord Jesus Christ did that as it is evident in the Holy Gospels and in the epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 23: 11-27). But is serving the Holy Body and Blood together wrong?

Christ offered the Bread and the Wine according to the rituals of the Passover Supper in the Old Testament, but in a new perspective of the reality of God's Kingdom (Matthew 26:26-29).

Christ offered "the Bread" and said, "This is my Body". He offered "the Wine" and said, "This is my Blood". In essence, the Holy Body and Blood are united in Christ.

Since the descent of the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost, the Last Supper is not a literal celebration of the Passover. It is a new celebration in the kingdom of the Father (Matthew 26:29), "the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9).

When Christ offered the Bread and Wine, His goal was not merely to perform the rituals of the Old Testament, but to present His Divine Life to the believers, through His Body and Blood, in the Eucharist.

He did that so we may enter into the Kingdom of God, according to the words of St. Peter the Apostle, “for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11).

We must also note that the sacrifices of the Old Testament were a symbol of the sacrifice of Christ. But they were not completely identical to the sacrifice of Christ.

Offering the Holy Body and Holy Blood separately, does not mean that we offer the sacrifice of Christ as one of the old testament’s sacrifices, whose blood is separated from their flesh when it is slaughtered.

Christ “through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God” (Hebrews 9:14). Indeed He died in the flesh but He is “a life-giving spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45).

According to the Orthodox faith: "His Divinity parted not from His Humanity for a single moment, nor a twinkling of an eye."

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Church does not present the sacrifice of Christ as a sacrifice that died and ended, like the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament.

Christ is the standing Lamb before the throne of God, “as though it had been slain”(Revelation 5: 6). In the essence, we do not see the Holy Blood separated from the Holy Body, in the book of Revelation.

Blood is life because “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Leviticus 17:11). The Eucharist is the living Body of Christ, that is, His body and blood together. He is alive interceding for us all the time before the Father (Hebrews 7:25). He “was dead”, but He is “alive forevermore” (Revelation 1 : 18).

In the liturgical prayers of the Eucharist, we do not remember just the death of Christ, but we remember His incarnation, His coming on the earth, His death, His resurrection, His ascension to the heavens, His sitting on the right hand of the Father, and His second coming from the heavens.

Isaiah saw a prophetic imagery of the Eucharist. He said: "one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, And your sin purged" (Isaiah 6: 6-7).

There is no doubt that this "live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar" is the living Body of Christ, the Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ served to Isaiah together.

In essence, the Lord's Body and Blood cannot be separated even if they appear to be separated in the paten and the cup and, whether they are served to the communicants separately or together.

In the Syriac Prayer of the Fraction, the priest confesses:

“Thus truly the Logos of God suffered in the flesh and was sacrificed and broken on the Cross. His soul parted from His body while His divinity in no way parted either from His soul or from His body...

And on the third day He rose from the tomb. One is Emmanuel who cannot be divided after the union; there is no division into two natures.

Thus we believe, thus we confess, and thus We affirm that this Body belongs to this Blood, and this Blood belongs to this Body.
3”

After the “Prayer of Fraction”, and before the confession that precedes the distribution of the Holy Communion, the priest smears the Bread [the Holy Body] with the Wine [the Holy Blood]. The priest says at the same time:

“The holy Body, and the precious and true Blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of our God. Amen. The holy and precious Body and the true Blood of Jesus Christ, the Son of our God. Amen. The Body and the Blood of Emmanuel our God, this is in truth. Amen⁴”

These liturgical practices and texts confirm fully that the Body of the Word of God is not intrinsically separated from His blood, even if they are apparently separate in the paten and the cup, and even if they are served separately or together in an appropriate manner. The Holy Body and the Blood are together the Living Body of the One Lord.

³ The Divine Liturgy

⁴ The Divine Liturgy

Receiving Communion In the Hand

The biblical texts about the Last Supper reveal that the "First Communion" was given by the Lord Jesus by breaking the bread and distributing it to His disciples. He did the same with the cup. The broken bread was probably exchanged from hand to hand.

Giving communion in the hand of the communicant has its roots in the practices of the Orthodox Church. Recently, the Syriac Orthodox Church has incorporated this method in its services⁵.

When receiving communion in the hand, the communicant should be guided by the words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem (313 - 386 AD):

"When you approach, take care not to do so with your hand stretched out and your fingers open or apart, but rather place your left hand as a throne beneath your right, as befits one who is about to receive the King. Then receive him, taking care that nothing is lost⁶.

The Priest smears the bread [the Holy Body] partly with the wine [the Holy Blood], showing it, put in in the hand of the communicant and says: 'The Body and Blood of Christ'. The communicant replies, 'Amen,' receives the Sacrament from his hand by his mouth, and then withdraws.

St. Aphrahat the Persian Sage [280-345 C.E.] referred to communion in the hand in his seventh article on the story of Lazarus the Beggar (Luke 16:19-31)⁷.

⁵ Statement Issued by the Antiochian Patriarchate of the Syrian Orthodox- Damascus 10 Azar 2020

⁶ Cat. Myst. V, 21-22

⁷ St. Aphrahat, Seventh Article, Sec 21

In his article, St. Aphrahat considered the Lazarus' sores as a symbol of the wounds of who they take on their hands in reverence, piety, and love.

St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373 C.E.) referred to handling what is holy in his response to Solomon's question: "Who collected the wind in his palms?" (Proverbs 30: 4)⁸.

In *Hymni de Fide* 10, St. Ephrem draws a parallel between the humanity of Christ which served as a garment to hide His Spirit and the elements of the Eucharist which serve the same purpose: the bread and wine contain "fire" and "spirit."⁹

St. John Chrysostom [347-407 C.E.) referred to the method of giving communion in the hand of the communion, in his teachings to the catechumens. He admonished them to keep their hands pure and not use them to harm others, as their hands are sanctified by touching the Body of Christ¹⁰.

The teaching of the early fathers on distribution and receiving holy communion in the hand reflects the deep spiritual meaning of being united with Christ through His Holy Body and Blood.

Such teachings also emphasize how this way raises the awareness of communicants to be careful not to use their body in a sinful way (1 Corinthians 6:15).

⁸ In *Hymni de Fide* 10

⁹ For a description of the symbolic value of fire as a portrayal of divine action in the Syriac tradition, see Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (M'Eth'o 2; Kottayam: SEERI, 1989), 42-44

¹⁰ Translated by T.P. Brandram. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 9*. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1889.)

Such thoughts have been lost from the conscious because of receiving communion as a routine habit. Receiving communion in the hand gives the communicants the chance to meditate as they see the Holy Body and the Blood placed on their hands.

The delicate feelings of the soul accepting the body of Christ in the hand are similar to the feelings of the bride in her union with her groom:

“When I found the one I love. I held him and would not let him go, Until I had brought him to the house of my mother, And into the chamber of her who conceived me” (Song of Songs 3:4).

Sanctity of the Eucharist

Some believe that they are not worthy to touch the body of the Lord with their hands, and only the priests are permitted to the Holy Body of the Lord.

We must distinguish between the priesthood in the private sense and the priesthood of faithful, in the general sense. The priests - in the private sense - are “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4: 1). They deliver the divine grace of the Father, in Christ, to the faithful through the sacraments (Luke 12:42).

As for believers in general, they are priests in the sense that they present their bodies - in their worship and praises to God - as a sacrifice to God on the altars of their hearts (Hebrews 13:15), Romans 12:1).

There is no difference between the priests and the faithful regarding the way of receiving the Holy Communion. At the last supper, the Lord ate from the bread and drank from the cup and then gave them to His disciples to eat and drink in the same way He did. While they were eating and drinking, He surprised them by saying, "This is my body", and "This is my blood".

There is also no difference between the priests and the believers regarding the worthiness to receive the body and blood of the Lord nor even touch it. It is for work of the Divine, not for our merit. The priests and the believers admit that they are not worthy of partaking of the communion, as mentioned in the divine liturgy.

Partaking communion in the hand is an opportunity to reflect on the amazing humility of God's eternal word. The One “who, being in the form of God... made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant,

and coming in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:6-7). He made Himself reachable. Everyone could touch it, get healing, and preach this good news (Matthew 14: 36, Luke 6:19, 1 John 1: 1-2).

If we do not accept the humility of the Son of God - that descended from heaven, we can touch him with our hands and eat him to be united with him - we deprive ourselves of the eternal life with Him (John 6:53).

With great humility and love, the Lord Jesus Christ bent down, not only to touch the feet of His disciples, but also to wash them (John 13: 3-10). What Peter thought that he was not worthy and tried to prevent Christ from touching and washing his feet, he risked his eternal destiny (John 13:8-10).

On the other hand, some people say that by taking communion in the hand some people may lose their sense of sanctity of the sacrament and of all other sacred objects in the church, like the altar and its vessels. But if this is true, then what about the priests who take communion by their hands more frequently?!

According to the commandments of the Lord and the Apostles, all things in the church should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). The church established rituals and orders for the priests and deacons.

No one should perform the role of the clergy if he is not ordained as a clergy. He should only serve as his rank mandates, otherwise this would be a confusion in the church that does not agree with the nature of God (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Having said that, this does not mean that believers - other than the clergy - are not worthy to touch the sacred objects in the church. Thinking

otherwise, means falling from grace and law of the old testament, as St Paul said in (Colossians 2:20-23).

In fact, all the believers - regardless of their priestly ranks - have confidence in entering into the Holy through the blood of Jesus" (Hebrews 10:19), and they have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Christ (Ephessians 3:11-13).

Although some people do not eat worthily, not distinguishing the body and blood of the Lord, the Lord still offers His love in amazing humility for all. But this might lead such scoffers to get sick and die. This is what St. Paul the Apostle explained clearly in (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). But with the unfaithfulness of people, God remains faithful in His unfailing love and humility (Romans 3:3-4).

Conclusion

Eucharist is the banquet of the eternal unshakable kingdom. The methods of partaking of holy communion are tools for serving people to receive the gift of the Lord's body and blood to enter the eternal kingdom. These tools are dynamic according to circumstances.

Eucharist is the mystery of our faith. This mystery will be revealed in the eternal kingdom. St Paul says: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In the eternal kingdom we will discover the truth of what we believe in, and we will live in the essence of what we practice by faith now. We shall be like Him and see Him as He is (1 John 3: 2).

We shall walk with Him in white clothes (Revelation 3: 4). We shall eat from the tree of life that is in the midst of God's paradise (Revelation 2: 7). "Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19: 9). Amen.