

Why do you intend to go to Holy Communion?

Each communicant should put that question to himself before he approaches the Table of the Lord. Many go to the Lord's Supper either quite thoughtlessly or with a wrong intention. Some go from mere force of habit, others only because their parents compel them to go, others again because they consider it a meritorious deed to partake of the Lord's Supper, still others because they wish to acquire or retain before men the 'appearance and name of pious Christians.' It is not surprising that such communicants derive no blessing from the Holy Supper but grow worse as time goes on.

A communicant who wishes to receive the Lord's Supper to his salvation must, in the first place, fully realize what the Lord's Supper is and for what purpose it was instituted by Christ, and in the second place, he must be well prepared to receive it as a poor sinner who is yearning for forgiveness.

There are those who have an entirely wrong conception of the Holy Sacrament, who consider it merely an empty memorial, instituted only for the purpose of remembering the sufferings and death of Christ. Holy Communion is that exalted, blessed mystery by means of which Christ, in the consecrated bread, gives us His body to eat and in the consecrated wine His blood to drink. This is the very body He assumed from the Virgin Mary and gave into death on the cross for the remission of our sins. It is true, we cannot see this mystery with our eyes, taste it with our mouths, or grasp it with our minds, but we are to believe it, for our Lord and Savior says: "Take, eat, this is My body. Drink of it, all of you, this is My blood." Our Savior is faithful and true, and He will certainly bring to pass what He has promised. He is all-wise and knows ways and means to fulfill His promises, even though this is beyond our understanding. He also is almighty, with Him nothing is impossible. He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. If we earnestly believe that we receive the blood of our Savior—true God and man in one person—in Holy Communion, and not mere bread and wine, we shall then approach the Table of the Lord, not thoughtlessly and lightly, but in deepest reverence and humility of heart, saying as did the centurion, "Lord, . . . I am not worthy to have You come under my roof" (Luke 7:6).

The benefits derived from Holy Communion are threefold in nature. First, by worthily receiving Holy Communion we receive forgiveness of sins and the assurance that such forgiveness imparts. God, rich in love, has provided the means that poor sinners need to render them certain of the forgiveness of their sins. These means are the preaching of the Gospel, Holy Baptism, and Holy Communion. Do not be sinfully inquisitive, asking why God has instituted three means instead of one for the purpose of conveying to us the forgiveness of our sins and making us sure and certain of this, but rather thank Him for these rich provisions. He who knows from personal experience how hard it is for a soul under conviction of sin to believe that his sins are forgiven will realize the greatness of God's grace and providing care in giving us not merely one, but several means of becoming certain of the forgiveness of sin. As surely therefore as you take the Lord's body into your mouth and drink the Lord's blood, shed for the remission of your sins, so certain you are to be of having forgiveness of sins, of being the undisputed possessor of this divine gift.

The second benefit of Holy Communion is life—not the natural life we received at birth and sustain by food and drink, but the new, spiritual life that begins in regeneration through Holy Baptism. It consists of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and our neighbor. Our Lord has designated His Holy Supper as a spiritual nourishment for the strengthening of this spiritual life. Of this Luther writes:

Holy Communion is aptly called a food for the soul, as it nourishes and strengthens the new man, for while we are born again by Baptism, man retains his old nature in his flesh and blood, and there are so many obstacles and temptations on the part of the devil and the world that we often grow faint and weary and at times even falter. So the Lord's Supper is given for a daily food and nourishment, that faith may be refreshed and strengthened and not repulsed in this battle, but ever grow stronger and stronger. The new life is of such a nature that it must constantly grow and progress. This new life has a great deal to endure, since the devil is an enemy who has great wrath. If he finds that he cannot take us by a bold stroke, he tries all his wiles, presents all his allurements, and does not stop until he has tired us out, so that we either abandon our faith or become listless and impatient. But when our heart is in this condition, being about to succumb, we have the comfort that in this Sacrament it can be again strengthened and refreshed.

The third benefit of Holy Communion is eternal salvation, for even as unforgiven sins bar us from heaven, so forgiveness of sins opens the door to eternal salvation. "For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation."

Now all depends on communing worthily and being well prepared in order to receive this threefold benefit. This, however, is not a worthiness according to the Law but according to the Gospel. It does not consist in absolute freedom from sin and perfection of life. Worthiness is realizing our unworthiness and sinfulness, in having a contrite heart that is spiritually poor, in earnestly desiring the forgiveness of sins, and in taking comfort in this forgiveness and depending solely on our Lord Jesus Christ. On the other hand, those are unworthy and ill prepared who, in their conceit of self-righteousness, fancy they need no forgiveness of sins. Consider the Pharisee, who prayed: "God, I thank You that I am not like other men" (Luke 18:11). Consider also those who wholly despair of the forgiveness of sins, as did Cain, who said: "My punishment is greater than I can bear" (Genesis 4:13), and who will not let one relieve them of their thoughts of despair. There is another class of unworthy communicant, namely, those who persist in their wicked purposes and continue to serve sin knowingly or live in a state of relentless enmity with their neighbors.

Unworthy communicants going to the Lord's Supper also receive the body and blood of Christ, but they receive it in judgment and to their great damnation. For this very purpose St. Paul adds this earnest warning: "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the [Lord's] body eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:28-29). Whoever recognizes in himself these marks of an unworthy communicant should not presume to go to the Lord's Table in such condition. We do not mean that he should stay away permanently, but he should immediately repent and become a truly penitent sinner.

Are those of weak faith to be classed with the unworthy communicant? Not at all. It is these very guests who are welcome and belong at Christ's Table. The Lord will surely not cast out those who are weak in faith and frail in their walk but who feel their weakness and desire to become stronger. These He invites, for it is for the weak and the frail that He instituted His Holy Supper, that they might gather strength from this spiritual food. To them He says: "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28), and again: "Whoever comes to Me I will never cast out" (John 6:37).