

On Intercommunion

By His Eminence Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is the Mystery of the Church. When we say “sacrament” we mean an action that surpasses human reasoning, because it does not submit to the measures of the material world. It is an action in which God Himself participates. He sends His grace through material elements such as water, oil, and bread, and these become means for blessing the believers and sanctifying their lives.

This is not the place to elaborate on the theological meaning of the word “sacrament” in the Christian understanding. Our concern here is the heart of the Sacrament of the Eucharist—namely, Holy Communion.

The Gospel asks that anyone who approaches the holy chalice be reconciled with those with whom he has previously been in conflict. Why? Because in Holy Communion, the Christian community encounters Christ who dwells in and unites Himself with each of its members. Through Him, these members are also united with one another. The unity of the ecclesial community is realized through the presence of Christ within it and within each of its members.

Therefore, if someone remains in conflict, or is not in harmony or in the same faith as the others, he damages this unity and renders it merely external and apparent rather than real.

The fullness of the Church’s unity is realized in the Eucharist within the Divine Liturgy. The Church is one Body with one Head, who is Christ. The unity of the Church is a unity in faith, not a unity of emotions, sentiments, or political positions of any kind. For this reason, the apostolic Churches insist on the necessity of sharing the same faith among those who approach the one chalice.

Here, I would like to present what the Catholic Church itself says on this matter, so that Orthodox and Catholics alike may become acquainted with the official position of the Catholic Church as expressed by its popes. This is particularly necessary in light of certain unsound interpretations and practices that have appeared here and there and have become widespread in some circles, not to mention the accusations that sometimes accompany them.

Pope Paul VI (1963–1978) wrote an important pastoral letter concerning the Sacrament of the Eucharist entitled *Mysterium Fidei* (*The Mystery of Faith*), published on September 3, 1965. It is one of the most important documents addressing the Holy Eucharist in the context following the Second Vatican Council. Among its principal emphases is that the Eucharist stands at the heart of the Church’s liturgical life and is truly “the mystery of faith,” which must be safeguarded with the utmost reverence. Participation in the Eucharist is therefore a sign of unity in faith and cannot be understood apart from Catholic doctrine.

Pope John Paul II (1978–2005), in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (*The Church from the Eucharist*), wrote in paragraph 42 about the importance of the Eucharist as a sign of unity among believers and emphasized doctrinal agreement. He stated that the practice of sharing the Eucharist must be consistent with Catholic doctrine:

“The safeguarding and promotion of ecclesial communion is a task of each member of the faithful, who finds in the Eucharist, as the sacrament of the Church's unity, an area of special concern. More specifically, this task is the particular responsibility of the Church's Pastors, each according to his rank and ecclesiastical office. For this reason, the Church has drawn up norms aimed both at fostering the frequent and fruitful access of the faithful to the Eucharistic table and at determining the objective conditions under which communion may not be given. The care shown in promoting the faithful observance of these norms becomes a practical means of showing love for the Eucharist and for the Church.”

He continues in paragraph 44:

“Precisely because the Church's unity, which the Eucharist brings about through the Lord's sacrifice and by communion in His body and blood, absolutely requires full communion in the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governance, it is not possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic liturgy until those bonds are fully re-established. Any such concelebration would not be a valid means, and might well prove instead to be an obstacle, to the attainment of full communion, by weakening the sense of how far we remain from this goal and by introducing or

exacerbating ambiguities with regard to one or another truth of the faith. The path towards full unity can only be undertaken in truth. In this area, the prohibitions of Church law leave no room for uncertainty, in fidelity to the moral norm laid down by the Second Vatican Council.

“I would like nonetheless to reaffirm what I said in my Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* after having acknowledged the impossibility of Eucharistic sharing: And yet we do have a burning desire to join in celebrating the one Eucharist of the Lord, and this desire itself is already a common prayer of praise, a single supplication. Together we speak to the Father and increasingly we do so ‘with one heart.’”

He adds in paragraph 46:

“Catholics may not receive communion in those communities which lack a valid sacrament of Orders.”

It is worth noting that in 1979, on the feast of the Apostle Andrew—the patron saint of the Church of Constantinople (November 30)—Pope John Paul II presented the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios with a gilded chalice engraved in Latin with the words: “*We look forward together to the day when we shall partake together from the same Chalice.*”

Pope Benedict XVI (2005–2013) maintained the same general line as his predecessor, though with a stronger emphasis on doctrinal clarity. He affirmed that participation in the Eucharist must be the result of unity, not a means of achieving it. While he supported ecumenical dialogue, he rejected any steps that might be understood as doctrinal compromise.

Although Pope Francis (2013–2024) had sometimes shown greater pastoral openness in personal or informal remarks, it did not translate into any official change in canon law, nor did he abolish the doctrinal conditions governing intercommunion.

Regarding the directives of the popes concerning Catholics receiving the Eucharist in Eastern non-Catholic Churches, this is permitted only in exceptional circumstances—specifically, “in particular cases and under special conditions,” as stated in paragraph 46 of Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* (*That They May Be One*).

In presenting these brief citations, we hope they may help bring an end to certain practices that contradict the Church's teaching and that have appeared here and there, as well as to the unjust accusations sometimes directed at those who strive to preserve the faith with seriousness and fidelity.