

“WHY DID GOD PREVENT US FROM RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION?”

Sermon given by Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeev) of Volokolamsk (of the Moscow Patriarchate) on Holy Thursday, April 16, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dear Fathers, and dear brothers and sisters, I greet you with the feast of Holy Thursday. This is a very special day in our Church, because on this day, every year, we remember the institution of the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. We remember the Mystical Supper, when our Lord Jesus Christ took Bread, and having broken it, he gave it to His disciples. He took in His hands the Chalice and gave it to each of His disciples to drink from it. Concerning the Bread He said, “This is my Body, which is broken for you,” and concerning the Chalice He said, “This is my Blood which is shed for you.” From that moment began the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. After our Lord Jesus Christ was betrayed and condemned to death, after He died on the Cross and rose from the dead, the disciples would gather together in order to remember Him according to His commandment, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” When the priests of today serve the Divine Liturgy, the liturgy begins with that part which is not seen or heard by the faithful. It is the preparation of the bread and wine which will become the Body and Blood of Christ. This part of the liturgy is called the *proskomedia*, which means “preparation.” The priest takes a prosphora and cuts from it a four sided Lamb with the words “in remembrance of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ.” The entire liturgy is a remembrance of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. This is not only about remembering something that took place in the past. It is not some kind of a lesson in history. It is not merely a remembrance of a historical event. It is a sacred remembrance that continues from that time up until the present time in our own days and continues into the future as well. In this remembrance we become real participants in this historical event every time the Divine Liturgy is served and every time we receive Holy Communion. Every prayer in the liturgy tells us that the liturgy of the past is united with the present and the future. In the liturgy we remember the economy of salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The history of mankind begins with the creation of the world, the creation of the first people and the fall into sin by the first people. The entire Old Testament history is the story of the prophets who were sent to the people of God in order to enlighten them. Included in this enlightenment was the future coming into the world of our Lord Jesus Christ, God incarnate, God who became a man in order to save us and offer Himself to us. When we gather to celebrate the Eucharist we remember all of these events, as well as the entire history of the Church and all the saints who shone forth in the 2000 years of the Church’s existence. We remember all of the departed who lived as part of the Church and have died and who today are in the Kingdom of heaven waiting for us. Some, perhaps, are in a place of torment and wait for us to pray for them, that the Lord would deliver them from this torment which they suffer on account of their sins. All history is connected with the Mystical Supper, the present and the future. All people who believe and have believed in Christ all take part in it, whether visibly or invisibly, they are all present at every Divine Liturgy. The angels also participate in the Divine Liturgy with all of the faithful who come to church and also receive Holy Communion.

We are suffering now through difficult and unusual times. Many of us, except for the priests and certain church workers, are forbidden to be present in church and take part in the Holy Eucharist. When we attend church, we participate in the Eucharist fully only when we also receive Holy Communion. If we only attend the service and leave without having received Holy Communion, this, of course, is not entirely without profit. In attending the Divine Liturgy we are praying with the entire Church and participate with the angels in heaven, as well as with the entire community of the Church on the earth. However, complete participation in the Holy

Eucharist includes also receiving Holy Communion. Many of us, the majority of the faithful in the capital city of Moscow are currently prevented from this possibility. Currently you can only participate in the Divine services through the media. We must ask, why did God permit such a test for us, the faithful? Perhaps we didn't value enough this gift which He so generously offers to us at every Divine Liturgy. Let us remember how many times in our life we could have gone to church and we told ourselves, "No, not this time. Right now I'm tired, right now I don't have time because I have other things to take care of and to do. The church isn't going anywhere, the liturgy always takes place, I can always go to Confession and receive Holy Communion." How many times because of carelessness, laziness, or some other reason we skipped the liturgy? Now we are feeling the irreplaceableness and incomparableness of the gift of Holy Communion when we don't have the ability to participate in the Mystical Supper on this sacred Holy Thursday. Let us all thank God that He gave us this sacred Mystery and in the future let each of us never skip the Divine Liturgy and to receive Holy Communion if we have the possibility to unite ourselves with the Lord.* We don't know in the future if this possibility will be taken away from us again like it is now. Let us ask the Lord to help us during these difficult days to still feel that we are part of that community [the Church] which He founded. When we read the account of the Mystical Supper, we notice that only the 12 Disciples [Apostles] of Jesus Christ were present and took part. Not only the Mother of God, but the women who followed Jesus, as well as His many followers and even the LXX apostles were excluded. Only the 12 who were chosen to continue His work were present. After our Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, all of the faithful now took part in the Mystical Supper and the Kingdom of heaven was opened for everyone. Today many of us feel like the Mother of God felt when she stood apart and watched her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ betrayed to death, and like the women disciples must have felt when they stood apart when the Mystical Supper was celebrated, like many felt who were not permitted to participate in it. Let us ask the Lord to bestow on us His mercy, to our city, to our country and to our people. Let us ask the Lord that this trial which He has sent to us would end as soon as possible so that we can all again be united in our churches and in the Chalice of our Lord Jesus Christ.....Take care of yourselves and may God protect all of us!

* In the Russian Orthodox Church, private Confession is required before each reception of Holy Communion.