

The Early Church Fathers on Receiving the Eucharist Worthily

It is not uncommon to see the vast majority of people at Sunday Mass receive communion. It is also not uncommon to see practically no one go to confession on Saturday. If the great saints and popes needed confession, I am guessing the rest of us need it to. The apostle Paul warned us about not being properly disposed when receiving communion. He said: "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord...**For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.**" The Church has always cautioned us against receiving communion unworthily. The Council of Trent proclaimed: "Now ecclesiastical usage declares that necessary proof to be, that no one, conscious to himself of mortal sin, how contrite whatsoever he may seem to himself, ought to approach to the sacred Eucharist without previous sacramental confession" (Session 13, Ch. 7). Rather than seeing confession as a burden, we ought to cherish it for the gift it truly is.

The Didache

In church, make confession of your faults, and do not come to prayer with a bad conscience ... Whosoever is holy, let him approach. Whoso is not, let him repent (4, 10 [A.D. 70]).

Justin Martyr

We call this food Eucharist, and no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [Baptism], and has thereby living as Christ has enjoined. For not as common bread or common drink do we receive these; but since Jesus Christ our Savior was made incarnate by the Word of God and had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so too, as we have been taught, the food which has been made into the Eucharist by the Eucharistic prayer set down by Him, and by the change of which our blood and flesh is nourished, is both the flesh and blood of that incarnated Jesus (*First Apology* 66 [A.D. 151]).

Origen

We give thanks to the Creator of all, and, along with thanksgiving and prayer, for the blessings we have received, we also eat the bread presented to us; and this bread becomes by prayer a sacred body, which sanctifies those who sincerely partake of it (*Contra Celsus* 8:33 [A.D. 248]).

Cyprian of Carthage

There was a woman too who with impure hands tried to open the lock in which she was keeping Our Lord's holy body, but fire flared up from it and she was too terrified to touch it. And a man who, in spite of his sin, also presumed secretly to join the rest in receiving sacrifice offered by the bishop, was unable to eat or even handle Our Lord's sacred body; when he opened his hands, he found he was holding nothing but ashes. By this one example it was made manifest that Our Lord removes Himself from one who denies Him, and that what is received brings no blessing to the unworthy, since the Holy One has fled and the saving grace is turned to ashes (*The Lapsed* 26, [A.D. 251]).

Cyril of Jerusalem

Keep these traditions inviolate, and preserve yourselves from offenses. Do not cut yourselves off from Communion, do not deprive yourselves, through the pollution of sins, of these Holy and Spiritual Mysteries (*Catechetical Lectures, 23 On the Mysteries* 5, 23 [A.D. 350]).

Basil the Great

He, therefore, who approaches the Body and Blood of Christ in commemoration of Him who died for us and rose again must be free not only from defilement of flesh and spirit, in order that he may not eat drink unto judgement, but he must actively manifest the remembrance of Him who died for us and rose again, by being dead to sin, to the world, and to himself, and alive unto God in Christ Jesus, our Lord (*Concerning Baptism* Book I, Ch. 3. [A.D. 360]).

What is the mark of a Christian? That he be purified of all defilement of the flesh and of the spirit in the Blood of Christ, perfecting sanctification in the fear of God and the love of Christ, and that he have no blemish nor spot nor any such thing; that he be holy and blameless and so eat the Body of Christ and drink His Blood; for 'he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh judgement to himself.' What is the mark of those who eat the Bread and drink the Cup of Christ? That they keep in perpetual remembrance Him who died for us and rose again (*The Morals* 22 [circa A.D. 370]).

John Chrysostom

Take care, then, lest you too become guilty of the body and blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:27). They slaughtered His most holy body, but you, after such great benefits, receive Him into a filthy soul. For it was not enough for Him to be made man, to be struck and to be slaughtered, but He even mingles Himself with us; and this not by faith only, but even in every deed He makes us His body. How very pure, then, ought He not be who enjoys the benefit of this sacrifice (*Homilies on Matthew* 82:5 [A.D. 390]).

Augustine of Hippo

You should understand what you have received, what you will receive, indeed what you should receive daily. That bread that you see on the altar and that has been sanctified by the word of God is the body of Christ. That chalice—rather, that which the chalice contains, has been sanctified by the word of God and is the blood of Christ. Through these things the Lord Christ wished to entrust to us his body and his blood, which he shed for us unto the remission of sins. **If you receive them well** you are that which you receive. (*Sermon 227 On Easter Sunday* [A.D. 414]).

Theodore of Mopsuestia

[if we have sinned], the body and blood of our Lord ... will strengthen us ... if with diligence we do good works and turn from evil deeds and truly repent of the sins that befall us, undoubtedly, we shall obtain the grace of the remission of our sins in our receiving of the holy sacrament (*Catechetical Homilies* 16 [circa A.D. 428]).