

Holy Communion and Menstruation

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Occasionally an old debate re-emerges and parishioners get caught up in the ideas being argued. So it is that I was asked the other day about whether menstruating women should be allowed to come to Holy Communion. This issue has come up from time to time throughout the Centuries of Christianity's existence. We see this being addressed for example in the 4th Century document called The Apostolic Constitutions, written about 375AD. In this writing, concern about menstruation is portrayed as really belonging to a Judaizing of Christianity – a return to following the Law not supported by the New Testament. That document states the following:

Now if any persons keep to the Jewish customs and observances concerning the natural emission and nocturnal pollutions, and the lawful conjugal acts (Leviticus xv), let them tell us whether in those hours or days, when they undergo any such thing, they observe not to pray, or to touch a Bible, or to partake of the Eucharist? And if they own it to be so, it is plain they are void of the Holy Spirit, which always continues with the faithful.

The point being made is that for baptized and chrismated Christians, we have been given the Holy Spirit, which cannot be taken away from us by conjugal acts or natural emissions. If we don't have the Holy Spirit while engaged in these acts, then we are void of the Holy Spirit at all times. The corollary is if we have the Holy Spirit received in our baptism and chrismation, then we can receive Holy Communion even if in menstruation. Since we don't lose the Holy Spirit through acts of natural emission or conjugal acts, then we can receive Holy Communion after such acts. *The Apostolic Constitutions* continues:

For concerning holy persons Solomon says: "That every one may prepare himself, that so when he sleeps it may keep him, and when he arises it may talk with him." (Proverbs 6:22) For if you think, O woman, when you are seven days in your separation, that you are void of the Holy Spirit, then if you should die suddenly you will depart void of the Spirit, and without assured hope in God; or else you must imagine that the Spirit always is inseparable from you, as not being in a place. But you stand in need of prayer and the Eucharist, and the coming of the Holy Ghost, as having been guilty of no fault in this matter. For neither lawful mixture, nor child-bearing, nor the menstrual purgation, nor nocturnal pollution, can defile the nature of a man, or separate the Holy Spirit from him. Nothing but impiety and unlawful practice can do that." (*The Apostolic Constitutions*, Kindle Loc. 3158-69)

This 4th Century Christian document is pretty clear that only Christians with wrong ideas about menstruation and the like will abstain from Holy Communion. Interestingly, St. John of Damascus (d. 749) thought the Apostolic Constitutions and their canons should be counted and read as Scripture in the Orthodox Church.

Though the teaching about menstruating women and Holy Communion has actually varied in different periods of Orthodox history and in the varying cultures influenced by Orthodoxy, there have been some clear teachings that say this should not be a concern for Christians. The concern results from a tendency ever present in the legalizing piety of Orthodoxy toward Pharisaic attitudes. It is a piety that becomes popular at times. For some it *seems* more pious to abstain from Communion when in menstruation. However, since we don't follow the Jewish Law regarding clean and unclean in all matters, it seems unusual that we would pick this one matter and then suddenly make ourselves feel more holy by keeping one aspect of the Law. We would do well to remember the words of St. James in his epistle: *"For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."* The piety which says menstruating women should refrain from Communion seems to say that you can keep one point of the law and ignore the rest and consider yourself holy.

As *the Apostolic Constitution* points out it is really only *"impiety and unlawful practice"* which can separate us from the Holy Spirit. Neither childbirth nor menstruation is impious or unlawful. Additionally one might ask oneself, if in the Liturgy we faithfully proclaim Christ's commandments – *"Take, eat"* and *"Drink, all of you"* – under what circumstance would we dare disobey Christ? He commands us to receive His Body and Blood for the remission of sins. Why disobey the Lord?

I see the question about women's menstruation and Holy Communion in the context of [Acts 15](#), where there is a debate in the nascent Christian community as to whether Gentile men must become circumcised in order to become Christian. In other words, are Christians obligated to keep Torah? The then early Christian community, largely Jewish, had to decide whether you must become a practicing Jew in order to become a Christian. The council of apostles and elders decided, NO! If we read that text, we see that the chosen apostles of Jesus decided that the Law really was for a Jews a burden they couldn't bear, and so it was neither spiritually prudent or good to impose the law upon converts to Christianity. I think that decision by the apostolic founders of the Church applies today to the discussion on women and Communion. Does menstruation suddenly demand that Christian women must keep Torah? Following Jewish or Pharisaic practice is not required of us as Orthodox Christians. The Apostles themselves settled that discussion in their lifetime. Yet, pious ideas emerge which overrule even the apostles themselves. Indeed it has frequently become part of the piety of various Orthodox nationalities, and seems so pious to tell menstruating women not to receive Communion. There is, however, strong reason from the Apostles, in our Scripture and from the Tradition of the Church to recognize that piety for what it is and to know there is sound reason for us not to follow it. Our task is, as we pray in the baptism liturgy to *"preserve our baptismal garment and the earnest of the Spirit pure and undefiled unto the Day of Christ our God."* Neither menstruation or childbirth defiles the baptismal garment nor do they take away from any woman the Holy Spirit.

This debate will go on, and I'm not trying to resolve it. I am answering as a pastor a question I received from parishioners about how I see this issue.