



All the Holy Gospels record that the Lord Jesus Christ ate one final meal with His disciples on the eve of His arrest. The Eucharistic Meal and Words of the Lord Jesus Christ both symbolically represent that this final meal would be a foretaste of the great Messianic Feast which will occur at the end of all times. The Lord Jesus Christ reveals to His disciples at this final meal with them that He will neither celebrate the Passover with them again, nor drink of the fruit of the vine until the Coming of the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:15-18).

More than likely this detailed recording of fellowship and partaking of a meal was the final time the Lord Jesus Christ and His disciples would share in total assembly together prior to His Crucifixion.

Following the final meal together, the Lord Jesus Christ proceeds to the Mount of Olives with His disciples and warns them that they will abandon Him.

There are two significant issues pertinent in the Last Supper that need contemplation upon during this Holy Great Fast.

First, the fourth Holy Gospel of St. John places the Last Supper before the Passover and tells of only one

specific event that occurred during the Last Meal. The Lord Jesus Christ would lower Himself to the floor and wash the sandal clad feet of His disciples. Why did the Lord Jesus Christ wash the scantily covered feet of His disciples? Why would He choose such a lowly duty and St. John the Beloved feel compelled to vividly write of the act?

The open sandals of the Lord Jesus Christ earthly days necessitated that people had to frequently wash and clean their feet due to their dirty disposition. When someone entered a home as a guest it was a courtesy to provide water for them to clean their feet. But for a person to do this task for someone else was customarily performed with exceptional deference. To have washed the feet of His disciples transformed Him to the humblest in the room, both in position and task. It taught the disciples and us today that serving in His Holy Name often meant the lowliest and most humble of tasks belonged to those who sought out True discipleship.

Therefore through the exercise of the washing of His disciples' feet, the Lord Jesus Christ taught us to humble ourselves as He did prior to partaking of His Last Meal.

Second, the Last Supper was to contain symbolism of goodness and evil. A traitor sat at the table. A

traitor whose interest was not solely in gaining money as 30 pieces of silver in that day did not represent a great deal of wealth, but even more than this, the thirty pieces of silver represented the power of evil. The sentence "*and it was night*" (John 13:30) accompanies the story of Judas departure to carry out his mission of betraying our Lord Jesus Christ. Could this mean that Judas loved darkness rather than light? Or did it more accurately represent his deed as evil? Certainly this evil would come to destroy Judas very life. Judas definitely did not appreciate the great Last Meal he was made a witness to.

Does the story of Judas' evil tell us we should be free from all darkness in our lives to partake of the Holy Communion? When we proceed to take of the Communion when we have no sins and our lives are free from all evil? Is this why many refrain from partaking of the Lord's Body and Blood although they would like to?

What exactly is the preparation for Holy Communion or the state of being worthy of it?

We need to humble ourselves as the Lord Jesus Christ did when washing the feet of His disciples and participate fully in repentance and confession. This

makes us lowly, our hearts purer and will discourage evil from overtaking our thoughts and actions.

We cannot become righteous without the help of the Lord. In the Holy Book of Galatians 2:21 says, "*If righteousness comes by Law, then Christ is dead in vain.*" St. Paul is emphasizing to us in this verse that if we wait until we feel that we are righteous enough to partake of the Holy Communion then we desire to become righteous through our own human efforts.

What should be done is that we proceed to Holy Communion participating in Confession at the very minimum of every 40 days, with all our weaknesses and imperfections ever before us, so that God will make us righteous as the father did with the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son went to the father just as he was, penitent, sorrowful, and unclean. He touched his father's heart with his remorseful repentance, received a new robe, shoes for his bare feet, and a gold ring for his finger. The Prodigal Son was reunited once again with his father and evil did not overtake his thoughts and actions permanently because of his repentance.

To partake of the Holy Communion also means to fear and appreciate the great honor of this great Sacrament of the Coptic Church. Often misunderstood in the Divine Liturgy is the saying

"Holies for the Holy." It is not the people who are expected to be holy by themselves but through His grace and mercy. This is why we say, "We are not holy but we are sinners not worthy of that Name." The only Holy and the Holy of Holies is the Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified for our Salvation. That is why the response of the people is, "One is the Holy Father, One is the Holy Son, One is the Holy Spirit, Amen."

When the deacon chants, "Pray for the worthy partaking of this Holy Mystery," he encourages the people not to proceed to the Holy Communion without fear and thoughtfulness. St. Paul says he that eats and drinks unworthily, eats and drinks damnation upon himself not discerning the Lord's Body (I Corinthians 11:29). We are not to be negligent and are to examine ourselves and then eat of that Bread and drink of that Cup (I Corinthians 11:28).

St. John Chrysostom said, "Let no one proceed to the Holy Communion with laziness or negligence, but let all go to receive it with enthusiasm and preparation so that we may not be punished. Do not be guilty of His Body and Blood as those who crucified Him."

Judas most probably was initially determined to lead a holy life as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. He

reverted to sinning, perhaps not deliberately in the beginning, but in the end carelessly and with a weak nature. If Judas had presented his weak nature to the Lord Jesus Christ and confessed and repented the Lord would certainly have been his advocate and he in the end would not have lost all hope.

"O God, as You accepted the repentance of the thief on Your right while on the cross, accepts the confession of Your people. Forgive all their sins for the sake of Your Holy Name which is called upon us, and according to Your mercy and not on account of our sins."

In this prayer of the Divine Liturgy, the priest asks God to accept the confessions and repentance of his people, just as He accepted the confession and repentance of the thief at Golgotha.

Following the Doxologies and the Orthodox Creed during the Divine Liturgy, the priest holds the cross with the three lit candles to signify that He Who suffered Crucifixion is the Light of the world, humbly sacrificing Himself to give light to those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death. Standing in front of the Sanctuary the priest spreads both his arms, holding the cross with the three lit candles in his right hand while the left hand is being opened in supplication and humility.

While facing the East, and without making the sign of the Cross, the priest chants, "God have mercy upon; settle mercy upon us." Still facing the East, the priest makes the sign of the Cross and says, "Have compassion upon us." He then turns to the North and while signing the Cross again says, "Hear us." Then turns toward the West, gives the blessings to the congregation, and says, "Bless us." The congregation bows their heads to then receive the blessings. The priest turns toward the South and says, "Keep us" making the sign of the Cross. He turns toward the East once again and with the sign of the Cross says, "Help us". Still in the Easterly direction he completes this litany "The Prayer of God Have Mercy Upon Us", without signing and saying, "Take away Your anger from us, visit us with Your salvation and forgive us our sins."

St. John addresses forgiveness of sin in this manner, *"My little children, these things write I unto you that you sin not. AND if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Righteous. And He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world"* (I John 2:1-2).

In summary, no one is without sin. Every earthly person will stumble and fall occasionally, even in their spiritual lives. The Lord Jesus Christ reminds

us that whenever we make mistakes we can repent and begin again if we are humble and have the desire to avoid evil.

Finally, just as we personally continually seek repentance we must also forgive others their trespasses against us to fully and wholly partake of the Holy Communion. This sometimes seems the hardest of all things

"If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns his back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive" (Luke 17:3-4).

Let us all pray during this Holy Great Fast to be humble and to strive toward worthiness through repentance and confession. Let each one of us actively seek God's mercy and to share this mercy with others through forgiveness attempting to avoid all evil.

Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern
United States