Communion and Intercommunion

Can Orthodox Christians receive communion in the Roman Catholic Church? Can a Lutheran receive communion in our Greek Orthodox Church? These are common questions that I encounter in my ministry. It is a complex issue because of our American society where we have many different Christian denominations co-existing within our cities and towns. The simple answer, which many people may know, to the question is “no.” However, most of our faithful could not answer as to why this is so.

Therefore, I share with you some excerpts from the excellent booklet, “Communion and Intercommunion” by Kallistos Ware published by Light and Life. Hopefully, it will shed some light on this sometimes sensitive topic from the Orthodox Christian perspective.

First, the issue of Intercommunion must be examined within the light of Eucharistic Ecclesiology. In other words, the Doctrine of Holy Communion within the life of the Church is foundational to our understanding. One may ask, “What is the Church here for?” Primarily it is here on earth to preach the Gospel of Christ, to announce the Good News of the Son of God, crucified and Risen. Christ said to His Apostles at the Mystical Supper, “Take, eat, this is My Body...Drink all of you, this is My Blood of the New Covenant...” Before we proclaim anything to the world, we must partake of the eternal Mystical Supper of Christ. In other words, the Church in essence is a Eucharistic and Communal Body.

From the beginning, the Bishop has presided at the worship of the Christian community. All of his other functions as teacher or administrator are to be interpreted in terms of his role as celebrant of the Eucharist. There is an intrinsic link between the Church and the Eucharist. During the Liturgy, the celebrant prays to God, “Send down Your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts set before You.” The faithful and the Holy Gifts of Bread and Wine are consecrated together to become the Body of Christ.

The unity of the Church is realized and maintained through the act of Holy Communion. The Eucharist creates the unity of the Church. Unity is not imposed
juridically from the outside. Rather, unity is created from within by the celebration of the Liturgy. Each local church (Eucharistic center) is the Church in its fullness for the whole Christ is present, not just a part of Him. Therefore, each local church is one with every other local church and all together form a single worldwide communion.

However, the unity of the Church in the Eucharist cannot be truly made manifest and realized unless there are present, at the same time, two other kinds of unity: unity in faith, and unity in the local bishop. These three forms of unity are complementary and interdependent. Each loses its true meaning if divorced from the other two. Eucharistic unity, then, presupposes in the first place unity in faith. This is demonstrated concretely at every Divine Liturgy by the fact that the Creed, the statement of belief, is recited by the faithful before the reception of Communion.

Regarding unity in the bishop, St. Ignatius wrote early in the 2nd century, “Let no one do any of the things that concern the Church without the bishop.” Even today, whenever a priest presides at the Liturgy, he does so not in his own right but as the bishop’s delegate. That is why he commemorates the name of his bishop—not as a gesture of courtesy but as an ecclesiological necessity.

Eucharistic ecclesiology implies therefore, a threefold unity: Eucharistic unity, that is unity in the one loaf and the one cup of Holy Communion; Dogmatic unity, that is, unity in the one Faith; and Ecclesial unity, that is, unity in the bishop.

Therefore, intercommunion, or the sharing of sacraments between churches that do not share the same faith and/or bishop is a virtual impossibility. The Bible, the Church Fathers, and the Holy Canons know of only two possibilities: Communion and non-communion. It is all or nothing. Admitting one to communion and to church membership are identical; to what church one belongs is manifested where he receives communion, or where he is admitted to communion.