

THE TRIBUNAL

by

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In ancient times, the tribunal (in Greek, *bema*) was a raised semicircular or square platform in pagan Roman basilicas — oblong halls with double colonnades and a semi-circular apse at the end, used as courts of justice and places of public assemblies. Over the centuries, as the Roman Empire became Christianized, the basilica-type design came to be used for churches (for example, the church of Saint Demetrius the Great Martyr in Thessalonica).

The tribunal took on a whole new significance in the Christian Church. It still signified the place where judgments were made, but now, the sentences handed out had other, eternal implications.

In a previous article ("Holy Tradition and the Traditions of Men"), we made reference to a number of holy canons that emphasized that if, without good cause, one did not attend church and partake of the Holy Mysteries *for three consecutive Sundays*, one could be excommunicated from the Church. What is the reason for such rigor?

Think of it this way: A friend invites you to a banquet. In one instance, you may not be disposed to go, so you make up excuses ("I'm too busy." "I just got married." "I just bought a house across town," etc., etc.) In the second instance, you may decide to go, but then you don't partake of the food that is being offered ("I'm not hungry." "I'm on a diet." "I'm a vegetarian," etc. etc.) In both cases, you have insulted your host who went to the trouble to prepare the banquet and then invited you. You have shown disdain for your friend.

In the Church, the Host who is inviting you is Christ Himself. The banquet that is being offered is the Holy Eucharist and the Holy Mysteries of the Church, and you, on your part, make excuses in order to absent yourself, or, you go, but do not deign to partake of the Divine Nourishment that is being offered. In return for your Host's beneficence, you turn up your nose. You have insulted your Host's generosity. You have disdained your Friend's Offering.

You have cut yourself off from Holy Communion (that is the meaning of "excommunicate".)

But that is not all.

What is the deeper cause of your not being interested in partaking of the Heavenly Banquet? What other things have become more important to you?

Is it your business affairs? Is it your lifestyle? Is it the theater, or some other sources of entertainment? Is it alcohol or drugs?

Whatever it is, you have made a choice that estranges you from the Banquet, and you say, "No thank you" to Christ the Eternal Host of the Banquet. *That* is why the place where the priest stands, offering you the Holy Communion, is called the *Bema*, the Tribunal. If you have prepared yourself as much as is humanly possible, and are living in a manner that makes you worthy (with God's help) to partake of the Holy Mysteries, it symbolizes also your worthiness to participate in God's Heavenly and Eternal Kingdom. But if you are not interested enough, for this or that reasons, and have not prepared yourself properly to participate in the Banquet, this prefigures your eternal condemnation.

So, when the priest stands at the Tribunal, and says, "With fear of God, faith and love draw near," and you say "No," if the eternal judgment were to take place at that instant, you would be condemned. The same would happen if you partook of the Banquet unworthily.

But if you have striven to the best of your ability to be ready to partake of the Banquet, then you will hear from the Tribunal: "Enter thou in the joy of thy Lord." With the help of the grace of God, you have passed this "preview" of the Last Judgment.

This is why we constantly pray to God that we may have a "good defense" before the dread *Judgment Seat* [Tribunal] of Christ."

And this is why we respond to that entreaty with the words: "Grant this, O Lord!"