

# VIII. Preparing to Receive Communion

The *First Apology* of Justin Martyr describes the early Eucharist (ca. 150) and its structure. It appears there were no rites to prepare for communion.

And on the day called Sunday,  
all who live in cities or in the country  
gather together to one place,  
*and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits;*  
then, when the reader has ceased,  
the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the  
imitation of these good things.  
Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before  
said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and  
water are brought, *and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen;*  
and there is a distribution to each,  
and a participation of that over which  
thanks have been given,  
and to those who are absent a portion is sent  
by the deacons. (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 67)

## The Greeting of Peace

The *General Instruction* instructs us that the Sign of Peace is meant to be a prayerful gesture signifying the Church shares *now* in the peace of the Last Day. It warns against the rite becoming prolonged, boisterous, or distracting. Finally, it indicates that the presider should always remain in the sanctuary, greeting only those ministers around him unless... (see GIRM 154b)

## The Breaking of the Bread, or the Fraction Rite

The Breaking of the Bread follows the Sign of Peace. The gospels point to the significance of this gesture by referring to the Eucharist as “the breaking of the bread.” What might it mean? What does the *GIRM* mean by quoting 1 Corinthians 10:17? that the rite “signifies that the many faithful are made one body?” One idea...

“The priest breaks the Eucharistic Bread, assisted, if the case calls for it, by the deacon or a concelebrant. Christ’s gesture of breaking bread at the Last Supper, which gave the entire Eucharistic Action its name in apostolic times,  
*signifies that the many faithful are made one body*  
(1 Cor 10:17) *by receiving Communion from the one Bread of Life which is Christ,*  
who died and rose for the salvation of the world.  
The fraction or breaking of bread is begun  
after the sign of peace  
and is carried out with proper reverence,  
though it should not be unnecessarily prolonged,  
nor should it be accorded undue importance.  
This rite is reserved to the priest and the deacon.”  
(GIRM 83)

We all want to be whole, intact, protected from “being broken.” “If I give of myself, there may be nothing left.” The paradox is this: There is one Christ and one Body. Even though the one Bread is broken, each portion still communicates the full presence of Christ to those who receive him in faith. Broken yet undiminished.

Love, though broken or given away, is never lessened. The breaking of the bread gives each a share in the whole Christ, the breadth and depth of divine love.

## The “Lamb of God” Invocation

“The supplication *Agnus Dei*, is, as a rule,  
sung by the choir or cantor  
with the congregation responding;  
or it is, at least, recited aloud.  
This invocation accompanies the fraction and,  
for this reason,  
*may be repeated as many times as necessary until the rite has reached its conclusion...*” (GIRM 83)

Pope Sergius I, a Syrian, introduced the *Agnus Dei*, the “Lamb of God,” into the liturgy, at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is a repetitive litany, a *supplication* to the Lamb who has been offered up on our behalf. Might it also serve as praise of God (narrative) who saves us through the Lamb?

### *The Communion Rite includes:*

The Lord’s Prayer  
the Sign of Peace  
the Breaking of the Bread  
(the Fraction Rite)  
Communion  
the Prayer After Communion

## The Showing of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine

“Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.” The first part proclaims the Church’s faith that the consecrated Bread and Wine is the Body and Blood of Christ, now shown to the people under the title, “Lamb of God.” Christ is the One who takes away our sins, our Redeemer. He is the One who welcomes sinners to the table.

A subtle second focus underscores the eschatological reality of Communion. That is, we all share in the final banquet of the Lamb *now*, at this time – today. The faithful are invited to a foretaste *now* of the great and final Banquet at the end of time! That banquet is *here*, *but not yet in fullness*. We share *today* in that future reality even as we manifest the promise of the Lord fulfilled in our Communion.

“Lord, I am not worthy...”

The community responds with a simple yet profound act of humility, speaking a form of the words of the centurion whose daughter was soon to be healed by

Jesus: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed." (see Matthew 8:8)

Words like, "Lord, I am not worthy," originated in Italian monasteries dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It was not until the Council of Aix (1585) that the use of the whole phrase (above) was decreed to be used as a declaration of the faithful's belief in the Real Presence to counter its denial after the Reformation. It was introduced into the order of Communion in the *Roman Ritual* of 1614 for the priest to say *in Latin*; whereas the common practice before was to say it in the vernacular.

**A Note:** This is one of those points in the liturgy that functions as an "Ink Blot Test." Confusion (Eucharistic Prayer II – "giving thanks that you have held us *worthy* to be in your presence and minister to you."), resistance (struggles with self-esteem), attraction (a humble sinner) follow. The Greek, *hikanos*, means "enough, sufficient, inadequate": "I am not sufficient to save myself from sin or misery, not adequate enough to save others. As a creature of God, I am insufficient though I dream of greatness."

### The Rite of Communion – Some Remarks

The *General Instruction* pauses, as it were, to make several important remarks at this juncture which could easily be passed over. It highly recommends that the faithful receive the Eucharistic Bread from hosts consecrated at the liturgy they are attending. GIRM considers it less than desirable to serve Communion to the faithful with hosts taken from the tabernacle – a healthy challenge to most parishes in the U.S.

"It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest himself is bound to do, *receive the Lord's Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass* and that, in the instances when it is permitted, *they partake of the chalice* (cf. below, no. 283), *so that even by means of the signs Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated.*" (GIRM 85)

Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of the faithful receiving from the chalice for the sake of a more complete participation in making Communion with God and others. This, too, challenges both parishes that don't offer the Cup often and the faithful who pass it by.

### Brief Excursus – Receiving the Blood of Christ

Not a small number of the faithful avoid receiving the Blood of Christ when it is offered at liturgy. Why?

Why resist receiving from the chalice? Let's examine this. Many of us are afraid of blood. We are counseled to wear latex gloves when dealing with spilled blood because it may contain serious and life-threatening diseases – HIV/AIDS, STD's, or other blood-borne pathogens harmful to human life. Some wish to avoid flu

germs and the like. Blood, today, suggests death more than life.

But, isn't that what we say? Baptism incorporates us into Christ's death and resurrection. We receive his Body given up for us, his blood poured out. Might there be a correlation between today's fear of blood and our fear of dying to self? Perhaps some wish to control their fears of diminishment by avoiding the Blood of Christ.

### The Communion Song

Next, GIRM addresses the intent and ritual function of the Communion Song. Singing here stresses the unity, joy, and 'communitarian nature' of the procession. Thus, GIRM concentrates throughout its focus on fostering communion among members of the assembly.

"While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion chant is begun. Its purpose is *to express the communicants' union in spirit* by means of the unity of their voices, *to show joy of heart*, and *to highlight more clearly the "communitarian" nature of the procession to receive Communion.* The singing is continued for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful." (GIRM 86)

### FYI – One More for Liturgy Nerds like me

By the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the practice of the faithful receiving Communion had fallen into such disuse, that tradition records how Caesarius of Arles (6<sup>th</sup> century bishop of Gaul) directed his flock to remain in church "until the Lord's Prayer has been said and the people have received a blessing." In other words, the liturgy ended after the Lord's Prayer and Communion was distributed to the few *after* their dismissal..

### For discussion/reflection:

- What did you learn from this article?
- What is your experience of the Breaking of the Bread?
  - What is your experience of 'being broken' for others? Attraction? Aversion?
- What is your experience of singing or reciting the *Lamb of God*?
- What is your experience of the prayer, "Lord, I am not worthy?" What did you learn here?
- Do you tend to receive the Blood of Christ? What attracts you about receiving? Repels you?

This is the eighth in a series of articles about the liturgy. Article #9 will present "*The Body of Christ... Amen!*"