

The Reception of Holy Communion at Mass



At Mass, when we hear the invitation, “Happy are they who are called to his supper,” we know it is Christ who is calling us to his holy table. As we process to the Eucharistic table, our identity is revealed as a pilgrim people on our way to the heavenly Jerusalem. For the table we approach is no ordinary table; the food and drink we share is no ordinary supper.

And the company around this altar includes far more members of Christ’s Body than our eyes take in. Our faith enables us to understand that our communion will not only be with Christ and the immediate community around us—it includes people of every race and nation and all the great saints and followers of Jesus throughout the ages.

At times, it may be hard to believe that our Lord can make the community we know, full of faults and shortcomings, into his Body. Yet this is what we proclaim to be true as we prepare to say “Amen” before the Body and Blood of Christ.

This holy meal is already a taste of heaven. Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: they already possess it on earth, as the first-fruits of a future fullness which will embrace man in his totality. For in the Eucharist we also receive the pledge of our bodily resurrection at the end of the world. (Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, #18)

During the procession to the altar, we sing a hymn or musical antiphon that helps predispose us for the Gift we are about to receive. The Church considers our singing together at this time so important that the General Instruction does not merely suggest, it **mandates that the assembly sing together** a hymn or psalm with antiphon or special communion chant during this significant moment. The General Instruction gives us the reason: “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.” (#86)

Some may regard this time of receiving communion as a time for their own private prayer, and so they may perceive the expectation of singing as an intrusion on their prayer. The reception of Holy Communion is indeed a personal moment, but it is also a corporate act. We are being joined to Christ and to his Church. Our participation in the singing both fosters and expresses this communion. There is time for silent personal prayer in the period of silence after receiving Holy Communion.

Because unity in the Church’s reception of the Eucharist is so important, the General Instruction calls for each country’s conference of bishops to determine one common posture and gesture of reverence to be used by all in receiving communion.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has determined that in this country, **communion is normally received standing and that a bow of the head is the act of reverence made by those receiving.** This shows the importance and significance of one common posture and gesture as a sign of our unity as members of the one body of Christ.

Receiving Holy Communion in the Catholic Church makes it visible that one is in full communion of faith. Respect for those who are not in communion with the Catholic Church forbids inviting them to a gesture that would violate their own conscience. As the communicant approaches and stands in front of the minister, the minister holds up the host and the communicant bows the head to Christ truly present in the Eucharistic elements. The minister

says, "The Body of Christ." The communicant audibly responds, "Amen," as an expression of belief in the real presence of Christ, body and blood, soul and divinity, who gives life to the believer. These words should not be altered; they are the universal ritual practice for Catholics throughout the world.

Christ's invitation to partake of his body and blood is an invitation to enter into intimate friendship with the Lord, through sharing in the mystery of his passion, death, and resurrection. The communicants' "Amen," then, is also a statement of their commitment to be the body of Christ in the world, to be bread broken and wine poured out for their sisters and brothers.

Communion may be received either in the hand or on the tongue. The decision belongs with the individual communicant, not the minister distributing communion.

A communicant receiving in the hand removes gloves, if any, and holds up the hands to receive with the left hand cupped and open, supported by the right (a left-handed person rests the right upon the left). In the fourth century, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem taught that in this way, our hands form a throne to receive our King (see Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds, #41). The minister places the Eucharistic bread in the palm of the hand, and the communicant carries it to the mouth with the other hand. We do not reach out and take the host from the minister; **we never take communion, but always receive it.** The host is always consumed immediately upon receiving it; we do not move to return to our place before doing so.

The communicant approaches to receive from the chalice, bows the head to Christ truly present in the Precious Blood, and the minister proclaims, "The Blood of Christ." The communicant again responds, "Amen."

Reception of communion under both forms more fully expresses the depth of what our communion with Christ means. Recall the words of Jesus to his disciples, "Are you willing to drink of the cup that I am to drink?" Receiving the cup into our hands is a gesture of faith that demonstrates our willingness to

share in the cross of Jesus and become a "living sacrifice of praise." Sharing the Eucharistic cup more completely expresses the new and everlasting covenant that is ratified in the blood of Christ. Reception of communion under both forms, bread and wine, more clearly responds to the Lord's invitation, "Take and eat. Take and drink."

In receiving from the chalice, the communicant is not to dip the host into the cup. The Norms clearly state that "it is never allowed" (#50). Receiving by intinction means that the priest dips the host into the Precious Blood and places it on the tongue of the communicant.

If for some reason a communicant is not able or willing to drink from the cup, then that person should receive only under the form of bread. A communicant who receives only the consecrated bread or only the consecrated wine fully receives Christ, whole and entire, given for our salvation.

While the heart of the celebration of the Eucharist is the Eucharistic Prayer, the consummation of the Mass is found in Holy Communion, whereby the people purchased for the Father by his beloved Son eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ. They are thereby joined together as members of Christ's mystical Body, sharing the one life of the Spirit. In the great sacrament of the altar, they are joined to Christ Jesus and to one another. (Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds, #5) Holy Communion has a more complete form as a sign when it is received under both kinds. For in this manner of reception a fuller sign of the Eucharistic banquet shines forth. Moreover there is a clearer expression of that will by which the new and everlasting covenant is ratified in the blood of the Lord and of the relationship of the Eucharistic banquet to the eschatological banquet in the Father's kingdom. (General Instruction, #281)

