

THE COMMUNION RITE

Sharing a meal is a very human experience. When family and friends gather around a table more is accomplished than consuming food. Relationships are built; unity is fostered; bonds are strengthened. It is actually this experience of meal-sharing that can help us appreciate our experience of Holy Communion.

The theological dimension, too, helps us to understand this sacrament. In the Old Testament, God asked the Chosen People share in various sacrifices (cf. Exodus 12:1-8; Leviticus 7:11-19). Depending on the sacrifice, the faithful were encouraged to eat the meat, grain or fruit of the offering. But Jesus Christ turned the former ideas of ritual sacrifices inside-out. Jesus became both Priest and Victim! We still feast on his everlasting sacrifice when we follow his command to “take and eat” and “take and drink” (Mk 14: 12-24; 1 Cor 11:23-26). The Lord commanded that “his Body and Blood should be received as spiritual food by those of the faithful who are properly disposed” (GIRM 80). As so, at the Lord’s invitation, we gather around his altar of sacrifice and dine on his sacred meal.

The Communion Rite can be examined in three distinct parts: The preparation for Communion, the reception of Holy Communion, and the period after Communion.

Preparing for Holy Communion

First, we take some time to prepare to receive Jesus. We are about to enter into a life-changing, intimate encounter with Christ and we need to prepare. We begin with the prayer that Christ himself taught us to pray (Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:1-4) — the Lord’s Prayer.

In the third century, Tertullian reminded us that the **Lord’s Prayer** is “truly the summary of the whole Gospel.” It makes sense, therefore, that this prayer is perfectly placed just before we are to receive the Eucharist. In it, we turn to Jesus’ Father and ours. We give God praise, we pray for our needs (our “daily bread”), and we ask God to forgive our sins. All this should be a necessary precondition for the reception of Holy Communion. The priest, alone, prays an “embolism” (a brief insertion) in which he asks God to deliver us from all evil, free us from sin, and keep us safe from all distress. The concluding acclamation (*For the kingdom...*) has its origins in eastern traditions and it has long been associated with the Lord’s Prayer. (Other Christian communities often make it part of the prayer.)

The Kiss of Peace is an ancient gesture. Saint Paul reminded the Christians of Rome to ‘greet one another with a holy kiss’ (Romans 16:16), and it is mentioned throughout early Christian literature. In the Middle Ages, an actual kiss was replaced by the use of “pax board” — a wooden or brass board which was passed around for everyone to kiss. In recent times, the rite of peace has been revived, but the gesture is usually that of a handshake. When we exchange a sign of peace, we show our willingness to live by the peace of Christ and we pray that the peace of Christ may dwell in those whom we encounter.

The ritual of the **Breaking of the Bread** originates in the Gospel narratives of the Last Supper. Saint Paul tells us that the one loaf of bread is a sign of our oneness in Christ Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). Using larger, unleavened loaves at our Eucharistic celebrations could foster an awareness of this fundamental symbolism. Most often, we use individual hosts which are distributed from one vessel into multiple communion vessels (ciboria). During the Breaking of the Bread, the ancient litany *Lamb of God* is sung or recited.

Distribution of Holy Communion

The entirety of the Mass — the Introductory Rites, the readings, the intercessions, etc. — has been orienting us toward unity. Even in the Eucharistic Prayer we prayed “that partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit” (Eucharistic Prayer II). The source and climax of this unity is our reception of the sacrament of unity — Holy Communion.

Scripture reminds us that we, though many, partake of one bread; we are members of one body (1 Cor 10:16, 17). In Holy Communion, the Body of Christ gives life to the Body of Christ, the Church. The minister, while holding the consecrated host, simply says “The Body of Christ.” We respond “Amen.” This is an Aramaic word, translated literally as “so be it” or more simply as “I believe.” This exchange of faith is actually very ancient — we find it in the writings of St. Augustine (Sermon 262, c. 405-411).

The restoration of the chalice to the faithful was one of the most significant liturgical developments in recent decades. When we receive the Blood of Christ, we likewise respond “Amen.” This is a fuller sign of our sharing in the one sacrifice of Christ who shed his Blood for us. [See the “Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America” (April 7, 2002) as well as GIRM 281-287,]

The normal posture for receiving Holy Communion in the dioceses of the United States is standing, unless an individual might choose to kneel. When we receive the Body of Christ or the Blood of Christ, we bow our heads as a sign of reverence. The consecrated host can be received on the tongue or in the hand at the discretion of the communicant (GIRM 160).

Together, we process to receive Holy Communion. As a further sign of our unity, a Communion chant, hymn, or the prescribed antiphon is sung. It begins when the priest is receiving Holy Communion and continues as long as the faithful are receiving Communion (GIRM 86, 159). The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* says this music expresses “the spiritual union of the communicants by means of the unity of their voices, to show gladness of heart, and to bring out more clearly the ‘communitarian’ character of the procession to receive the Eucharist” (GIRM 86).

Period after Communion

After receiving Holy Communion, the faithful may observe a period of silence. This silence is an opportunity to prayerfully thank God for his gift of the Eucharist. A psalm, canticle of praise or suitable hymn (GIRM 88) may also promote meditation. This music is not meant to be a solo performance, but a hymn in which the entire assembly takes part (ibid.) Finally, at the priest’s prompting, the faithful unite their intentions to the Prayer after Communion. The Priest prays for the community of faith, asking that they may experience the effects of Holy Communion.

CONCLUSION

Jesus not only comes to you and to me. He comes to us. Our entire community should be changed because of that. How can we better live out our Eucharistic communion? ■



Written by Rita Thiron and Fr. Ryan Rojo.

The English translation of The Roman Missal, © 2010. International Commission on English in the Liturgy Corporation. All rights reserved.