How are we called to receive communion?

This question came up during the presentation to the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion. Many ministers were talking about how people come up to receive communion and how, at times, it is difficult for them to know what to do. And they wondered if I could remind people of the proper way to receive communion.

The question is not about proper disposition. Obviously, if we are receiving communion, we should be in a state of grace, i.e., we should not have any known mortal sins that have not been confessed. We must believe that what we are receiving is really, truly, and substantially the Body and Blood of Christ. We must believe that it is no longer bread and wine, but truly Jesus’ Body and Blood. We also must have fasted for at least one hour before receiving.

We must have the attitude that what we are receiving is a gift. We do not deserve, or merit, the Eucharist. Christ is giving Himself to us in order to strengthen us in living out our faith. We must remember that the power of the Eucharist is tied directly to Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension. As we receive his Body and Blood, we are called to participate directly in the life of Christ because his very life comes to flow through our body. It is about strengthening us to live out our baptismal promises. The whole point and purpose of the Eucharist is that we will become what we receive. Therefore, how we approach the Eucharist is very important. We should approach the Eucharist, not as a group of individuals, but rather, as one body in Christ—called by Christ to be his body. Our procession to the altar is a sign that together we are one in Christ, gathered by his grace and power, and called by Him to receive from his altar, his very self.

As we approach to receive the Eucharist, we make a simple bow of the head as a sign of reverence. This is true for receiving both the Body and the Blood. If you choose not to receive the Blood, you should still reverence the chalice as you pass by: it is the Eucharist and therefore Christ Himself. Again, it is a simple bow of the head acknowledging Christ’s presence.

There are two options for receiving the Body of Christ. A person may choose to receive on the tongue or in the hand. If you choose to receive on the tongue, please make sure you actually open your mouth and stick out your tongue. Some people make it difficult to get the host into their mouth. If you receive in the hand, please place one hand on top of the other as though you are making a throne for Christ. And please do not try to take the Eucharist or snatch it with your fingers. We should always create a posture of reception/receiving and not one of taking. After receiving the Eucharist in our hands we should immediately place it in our mouth.

After receiving the Eucharist, we should return to our seat and either continue singing or pray. We must never leave Mass early. When we receive the Eucharist and then leave, we are saying that receiving the Eucharist is an individual moment with Christ. It is not, nor should it ever be. The end of Mass is an essential part of our obligation to be at Mass and we should stay until we have been sent forth by the Lord.