

The Reception of Holy Communion at Mass

Part 1

The Church understands the Communion Procession, in fact every procession in liturgy, as a sign of the pilgrim Church, the body of those who believe in Christ, on their way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. All our lives we who believe in Christ are moving in time toward that moment when we will be taken by death from this world and enter into the joy of the Lord in the eternal Kingdom he has prepared for us.

The liturgical assembly of the baptized that comes together for the celebration of the Eucharist is a witness to, a manifestation of, the pilgrim Church. When we move in procession, particularly the procession to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, we are a sign, a symbol of that pilgrim Church "on the way." For some, however, the experience of the Communion Procession is far more routine, similar perhaps to standing in line at the supermarket or at the motor vehicle bureau. A perception such as this is a dreadfully inaccurate and impoverished understanding of what is a significant religious action.

The Communion Procession is an action of the Body of Christ. At Christ's invitation, extended by the priest acting in Christ's person, we hear at Mass, "*Blessed are those who are called to the supper of the Lamb.*" The members of the community move forward to share in the sacred meal, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ which is the sign and the source of their unity. In fact, each time we move forward together to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, we join the countless ranks of all the baptized who have gone before us; our loved ones, the canonized and uncanonized saints down through the ages, who at their time in history formed a part of this mighty stream of believers.

This action by Christ's body, the Church assembled for the Eucharist, is manifested and supported by the Communion Hymn, a hymn in praise of Christ sung by the united voices of those who believe in him and share his life.

The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) takes this hymn very seriously, mandating that it should begin at the Communion of the priest and extend until the last person has received Communion.

For some, however, the singing of this hymn is perceived as an intrusion on their own prayer, their private thanksgiving after Communion. In fact, however, this hymn is prayer, the corporate thanksgiving prayer of the members of Christ's Body, united with one another. Over and over again the prayers of the liturgy and the norms of the GIRM emphasize this fundamental concept of the unity of the baptized, stressing that when we come together to participate in the Eucharistic celebration we come, not as individuals, but as united members of Christ's body.



In each of the Eucharistic Prayers, though the petition is worded in slightly different ways, God is asked to send his Holy Spirit to make us one body, one spirit in Christ. The GIRM admonishes the faithful that *they form one body, by hearing the word of God and by joining in prayer and singing...*(#96); it describes one purpose of the opening song of the Mass as to...*foster the unity of those who have been gathered* and says of the Communion Song that *its function is to express outwardly the communicants' union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices,...and to highlight the "communitarian" nature of the procession to receive Communion.* (#86).

It is difficult for some of us to embrace this emphasis on Mass as the action of a community rather than an individual act of my own faith and piety, but it is important that we make every effort to do so. Christ himself at the Last Supper pleaded with his Father: *Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us...Father may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you...* (Jn. 17:11;21). Baptism has joined us to Christ and to one another as the vine and its branches. The life of Christ, the Holy Spirit, enlivens each of us individually and all of us corporately, to guide us in our efforts to become one in Christ.

Finally, the fact that the Communion Procession is a profoundly religious action tells us something about the way in which we should participate in this procession. We are the Body of Christ, moving forward to receive the Christ who makes us one with himself and with one another. Our procession should move with dignity; our bearing should be that of those who know they have been redeemed by Christ and are coming to receive their God!

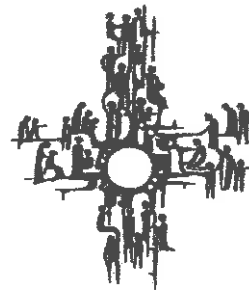


The revised 2002 edition of the GIRM asks the Conference of Bishops in each country to determine the posture to be used for the reception of Holy Communion and the act of reverence to be made by each person as he or she receives. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has determined that in this country Holy Communion will be received standing and that a simple bow of the head will be the act of reverence made by those receiving. These norms may require some adjustment on the part of those who have been using other practices, however the significance of unity in posture and gesture as a symbol of our unity as members of the one Body of Christ should be the governing factor in our actions.

Those who receive Holy Communion may receive either in the hand or on the tongue, and this decision should be that of the individual receiving, not of the person distributing Communion. If Holy Communion is received in the hand, the hands should first of all be clean. If one is right handed the left hand should rest upon the right. The host will then be laid in the palm of the left hand and then taken by the right hand to the mouth. If one is left-handed this is reversed. It is not appropriate to reach out with the fingers and take the host from the person distributing.

The person distributing Communion says audibly to each person approaching, *"The Body of Christ."* This formula should not be altered, as it is a proclamation which calls for a response of faith on the part of the one who receives. The communicant should audibly respond *"Amen,"* indicating by that response his or her belief that this small piece of bread and the wine in this chalice are in reality the Body and Blood of Christ the Lord.

When one receives from the chalice, *"The Blood of Christ,"* is spoken by the person distributing Communion and the communicant again responds *"Amen."* It should be noted that it is never permissible for a person to dip the host he or she has received into the chalice. If, for some reason, the communicant is not able or willing to drink from the chalice then that person should receive only under the form of bread.



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Liturgical Catechesis on the Eucharist

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The Gesture of Reverence for Receiving Communion and Giving Thanks Part 2

Gestures of homage and reverence for the Body of Christ are as old as the magi we hear about in the Christmas story. That is what St. John Chrysostom, the "Golden-Mouthed" bishop of Constantinople, told his congregation 1600 years ago: "The wise men paid homage to Christ's Body when it was lying in the manger." But he reminded his hearers that, "Unlike the wise men, you do not merely see Christ's Body; you know his power as well, and the whole divine plan for our salvation...Let us then awaken in ourselves a feeling of awe, and let us show a far greater reverence than did those foreigners..."

The Church has constantly desired a deep reverence on the part of all who receive Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. The outward gestures by which inner reverence has been expressed have differed from place to place and changed throughout history. Before the Second Vatican Council, those entering the Communion procession with other communicants and the entire congregation would recite the Act of Contrition. We would move to the Communion rail, kneel, and carefully receive the Host on the tongue (receiving in our hands and from the chalice were not permitted for laypersons in those days).

After the Second Vatican Council, standing in the aisle to receive Holy Communion became a widespread and customary way to receive Communion, either from a priest or deacon, or, after 1973, from a layperson who had been commissioned as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion. A simpler, shorter formula, "*The Body of Christ,*" invited each communicant to speak a sincere "*Amen,*" to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the assembly that shares it. Receiving the Body of Christ in the hand became an approved option, as did receiving the Precious Blood from the chalice, first on a limited basis, but now allowed at any Eucharist celebrated in our country. Clearly the way in which we Catholics receive Communion has changed since Vatican II, but one thing should be changeless: *our reverence and care in receiving the Lord Jesus in this holy sacrament.*

This is why the bishops of the United States included in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) that those receiving Communion should "make an appropriate gesture of reverence" (#160). In their adaptation to this document, our bishops have prescribed standing as the posture for receiving Holy Communion in the United States, a posture confirmed by the Vatican, as well as prescribing a "gesture of reverence." First, some words about standing.



Certainly throughout history and in Western culture, kneeling and genuflecting have expressed a reverence and humility before great personage, for example, before the queen of England. But today, in our contemporary American culture, standing is a more general and customary posture of respect and honor: for example, we rise from our seats when the President of the United States enters a room. Also, standing is a "resurrection" posture: it is how we Easter people symbolically express our sharing in the life of the risen Christ who stood triumphant over sin and the grave. Standing to receive Communion should look and feel different from standing in the check-out lane.

Perhaps such considerations have led our bishops to request unity in standing as we receive the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion, so that our bodies express what we believe in our hearts: the risen Lord is given to us as the pledge of our risen life with him.

The United States bishops have also declared that, "when receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence is also made before receiving the Precious Blood" (GIRM #160).



Thus, the "reverent gesture" is to be a *bow of the head* before the Sacrament. We come forward to Communion in the usual manner. We approach the Communion minister reverently and come to a complete stop, so as to focus on what we are about to do. Showing the consecrated host, the minister says, "The Body of Christ." We bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, "Amen." The minister offers the Sacrament to us, and we reverently receive the Body of Christ either in our hand or on our tongue. When receiving the Sacrament in our hand, we place one hand, palm up, on top of the other hand. Ancient writers called this gesture *making a throne for Christ the King*. After receiving the Sacrament in our hand, we take a short step to the side, stop for a brief moment and then reverently take the consecrated host using the hand which is under the hand holding the host, place it in our mouth and consume the host.

Likewise, when we receive the Precious Blood from the chalice, we approach the chalice and after the minister has said "The Blood of Christ," we bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, "Amen." We then take the chalice into our hands, drink, and return the chalice to the minister who wipes the rim of the chalice using a cloth purificator.

The practice in some places of a communicant taking the consecrated host and then dipping it into the consecrated wine is prohibited by liturgical law. It is also potentially irreverent as drops of the Precious Blood can fall onto the floor.

As a reminder, the "*reverent gesture*" is not simply a nod of the head but an unhurried bow of the head. Through our bow of the head we profess our faith in the Eucharistic presence of Christ, and express our reverence.

Finally, the General Instruction states that, after all have received Holy Communion, a period of quiet prayer and reflection is desired. Private prayer and thanksgiving, rooted in sacred silence, has long been a recommended practice through which the priest and faithful offer thanks for gift of the Lord in Holy Communion. The length of silence is dependent on the level of festivity and liturgical season. It should blend in with the rhythm of the Communion Rite. The Communion Rite is brought to completion with the Prayer after Communion by which the priest, in the name of the community, prays for the fruits of the mystery just celebrated.



We Dare To Say "Amen"

Part 3

Four-letter words can get you in trouble. Your mother probably taught you this when you were very young. In the liturgy we frequently use a four-letter word, and it can get us in trouble, too. It's a word that we adopted directly from the Hebrew language. The word is "**Amen**."

If you ask how to translate "*Amen*," the most basic meaning and valid definition is "*So be it*." "*Amen*" is a word that expresses our assent to what has preceded it.

Think of all the times we say "*Amen*" during Mass. At the beginning we say "*Amen*" to the sign of the cross. We agree that we are worshipping in the name of the Trinity. We say "*Amen*" to several shorter prayers during the Mass: the concluding prayer in the act of penitence, the opening prayer of the Mass, the concluding prayer of the universal prayers, the prayer over the gifts and the prayer after communion. In all these, our "*Amen*" makes the prayers our own, affirming what has been spoken in our name. We also say "*Amen*" at the end of the Glory to God and the Profession of Faith. With these two "*Amens*," we express our agreement with the praise offered to God and the faith that we share. Our most significant "*Amen*," however, comes at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer and at the reception of Communion. In different ways, these "*Amens*" express our willingness to join ourselves with Christ and embrace his sacrifice.



At the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, we generally sing the Great Amen three times. This "*Amen*" says that we accept and affirm all that has been proclaimed in the prayer, especially the Paschal Mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ.

Scholars tell us that the root word in early Hebrew from which "*Amen*" is derived meant "to pound in one's tent stake." Recall that when the Hebrew people were wandering in the desert, a tent was necessary to shield them from the heat of the midday sun and from the cold of the desert night. Thus this phrase and meaning sounds a lot

like our expression "*I'd stake my life on it*."

When we sing "*Amen*" at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, we are proclaiming that we will stake our life on the Paschal Mystery, that we are willing to die to self in order to rise to new life, and that we will accept whatever comes from following the Father's will as Jesus did.

Likewise at Communion, we say "*Amen*" when we receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. This response means more than agreeing that the bread and wine are Christ's Body and Blood. By saying "*Amen*," we accept the Body of Christ broken for us and the Blood of Christ poured out for us. We recognize that we are part of the Body of Christ who share this communion together. We express our willingness to become the Body of Christ in the world today; to pour out our lives for the sake of others. Thus the only proper response to the reception of Holy Communion is always **AMEN!** However, be careful when you say it. This four letter word can get you in trouble because of what it requires of you.