

Reflections on the Mass

Reflection 11: The Communion Rite, Part II

The Liturgy of the Mass is rich with signs of communion with Christ and each other. One ancient sign of unity that comes right after the sign of peace is “the breaking of the bread.” In fact, the entire Eucharistic rite was once simply known as, “the breaking of the bread.” By participating in the one bread that is broken and shared, we express symbolically the reality of being one in Christ.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul says: “The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for all partake of the one loaf” (*1 Corinthians 10:16b-17*). The unity Paul speaks of is highlighted by the priest breaking the large consecrated host and sharing at least some of the fragments with those present. The deacon may also assist in the breaking of the bread. While it is desirable that as many as possible share in the bread that is broken, the use of smaller hosts consecrated at the same time is a practical necessity at most Masses.

The sign of our unity with Christ expressed by the breaking and sharing of bread continues as the priest adds a small piece of the consecrated host with the consecrated wine. This gesture, introduced in the eighth century, signifies the unity of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the work of salvation. A prayer, dating from the middle of the eighth century, is spoken inaudibly by the priest and requests the fruits of Communion for everyone present.

Since the breaking of the bread was especially lengthy in the earlier celebrations of the Mass, it was accompanied by a chant. This later became what we call the *Agnus Dei* - the Lamb of God. The words “*Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world*” are taken from the acknowledgment given Jesus by John the Baptist (*John 1:29*). It acknowledges that Christ is the Paschal Lamb who has conquered death. The chant was originally sung by the people and was repeated for as long

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as necessary. As the time required for the breaking of the bread became briefer, it gradually was reduced to the text as we know it and is usually sung only three times, although it may be repeated, if necessary. From the tenth century on, it has always ended with the words - “grant us peace,” linking it to the sign of peace. Today the *Agnus Dei* is a litany-song of the choir, cantor and congregation, and may be repeated as often as necessary, but does not include the priest who is engaged in breaking of the bread.

After the Lamb of God concludes, the people kneel and prepare to receive Communion. The priest prepares himself by a prayer said quietly while those celebrating with him do so by praying silently. With these prayers, all are ready to receive Communion.

When we share a meal with family and friends, we are likely to hear at some point a welcome invitation to dine - Come to the table ... a comer [co-mair] ... mangia! [man-jeeh] The same happens at Mass. Over the past several weeks we have seen how the Eucharistic meal is prepared, and how we prepare to receive it. Now, the invitation comes as the priest elevates the chalice and host and proclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). He then proclaims words from the book of Revelation, “Blessed are those who have been called to the Supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). We respond in words that express both humility and confidence: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed” (Matthew 8:8). We are invited to look at the Eucharistic Bread and to express reverence, confidence and faith.

The celebrating priest receives the consecrated bread and wine first before distributing the Lord’s body and blood to each communicant. When distributing communion, the priest, deacon or extraordinary minister of holy communion shows the host to each person and says, “The Body of Christ”, to which the communicant responds, “Amen.” A similar formula,

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“The Blood of Christ”, precedes reception from the chalice. It is important to remember that we always receive communion; it is never permitted for a communicant to simply take the Body and Blood of Christ from the altar. It is received from a priest, deacon or extraordinary minister of Holy Communion.

Up to the eleventh century, the norm was to receive communion under both kinds: both the Precious Body and the Precious Blood. Over the centuries, a practice developed of not receiving from the chalice, except in special circumstances. The Second Vatican Council initiated a gradual extension of the ancient practice of receiving the Eucharist under both kinds. Thus, receiving both the consecrated bread and the chalice is now permitted at all Masses. Another ancient practice - receiving the Eucharistic bread in the hand - has been revived in recent years. Communicants now have the option of receiving either in the hand or on the tongue. Receiving from the chalice brings out the fuller meaning of the Eucharist.

In the United States, the norm is for communicants to receive Communion while standing, although kneeling, while not encouraged, is permitted by those who choose it. As a sign of reverence, we make a slight bow before receiving the Eucharistic Bread and the chalice. No genuflection should be made.

Since the earliest centuries, it has been the custom to sing a psalm during the Communion procession. The communion song, expressing unity, encounter with the Lord, and joy, should begin when the priest receives the Sacrament and should continue as long as is convenient. When there is no song, the antiphon found in the Missal is recited by the faithful, a lector or by the priest himself. To foster participation of the faithful, there should only be one hymn during the Communion Rite, although if the Communion procession is lengthy, an additional piece of music may be permissible. There may be a choral piece during the period

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of reflection.

After every meal, someone must do the dishes. After Communion, there must be a reverent cleaning of the vessels used during the Mass. Any consecrated hosts that remain may either be consumed or placed in the tabernacle. Any consecrated wine that remains must be consumed by the priest, the deacon or the extraordinary ministers. It may never be disposed of in any other way. In the Diocese of Salt Lake City, the priest or deacon purifies the vessels with water, at the credence table. Care must be taken that no fragments of consecrated hosts are left on the altar.

The Eucharistic meal concludes with the Prayer after Communion. It should be preceded by a period of silence and is introduced with the words, "Let us pray." This prayer is not a prayer of thanksgiving but, rather, asks for the spiritual effects or fruits of the Eucharist. It always concludes the Communion Rite, and only after this prayer may other activities follow, such as brief announcements.