



Understanding the Mass

Part 5

The Rite of Communion

Introduction

On the Road to Emmaus, the two disciples listened to their fellow traveler and their hearts burned within them. At table, He gave thanks and broke the bread; and in that action, they recognized the Risen Lord. At every Mass, we listen, we give thanks, and we share the Body and Blood of Christ so that in fact we may become what we receive.

The Lord's Prayer

The first preparation for the reception of Holy Communion is to pray the prayer that Jesus Himself taught His disciples—reaffirming who we are as members of His Body.

United in prayer to “Our Father,” the community acknowledges the holiness of God’s name which should never be taken in vain (Second Commandment). It prays for the coming of the Kingdom in its fullness and that God’s will, not our own, be done on earth just as it is in heaven. The community also asks for sustenance, most especially in the daily bread of the Eucharist, and seeks forgiveness and freedom from temptation and evil.

Gestures During the Our Father

Nowhere in the General Instructions of the Roman Missal are directions given instructing the faithful to join hands for the Our Father. In fact, the practice is discouraged for the simple reason that joining hands can be considered intimate contact that may be difficult for some who are expected to hold hands with a stranger. While not forbidden, great care should be taken not to impose the practice at Mass. In the same way, only the priest is instructed to extend his hands during the prayer.

The question “why?” should be asked when gestures not called for by the Missal are introduced.

Embolism & Doxology

The words spoken by the priest after the Our Father are called an embolism. With these words, he restates the assembly’s request for freedom from evil and sin, for relief from all distress and for peace. For all of this, we must rely upon God’s mercy, especially in this present time while we await the second coming of Christ.

The people respond with an antiphon of praise. *For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever.*

The Rite of Peace

This simple rite has been placed at various points in the Mass over the course of Church history—each with its own significance. For some time it was placed at the beginning of Mass between the Penitential Act and the Gloria as a way of signifying unity among the assembly. At other times it was placed before the Preparation of the Altar in keeping with the Scriptures that tell us to leave your gift at the altar and go first to be reconciled with your brother. It was, however, Saint Augustine who placed it where we find it today—between the Eucharistic Prayer and the Reception of Holy Communion. Here, it shows the unity of the assembly created by the Holy Spirit during the Eucharistic Prayer and which will be effected by sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ.

During this rite, the deacon or priest invites the people, *let us offer each other a sign of peace*. The sign given has and can be interpreted in accord with the circumstances. While a couple may wish to offer each other a kiss, a handshake or a wave can be sufficient. People should not get upset when the person next to them does not wish to shake hands—they may be trying to preserve you from the common cold or COVID.

Fraction

There are two parts to the Fraction Rite—the breaking of the bread and the mingling of the Body with the Blood.

The Breaking of the Bread signifies that the many faithful are made one body from the one Bread of Life which is Christ. It is Christ Himself who feeds us and who is not diminished by being broken, just as love given away is never lessened. We each share in the whole Christ.

The mingling of the Body and Blood of Christ is that moment when the priest breaks a small piece of the Host and places it into the Chalice. As he does so, he prays: *May this mingling of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it.* This action has a very long history in the Church's liturgy. In the ancient Church, the bishop alone celebrated the Sunday Mass in his church. When parishes were founded to carry out the work of the Church more locally, the pastor of every parish participated in the bishop's Mass and carried to his parish church a small fragment of the Eucharist. During Mass celebrated at the parish, this fragment was placed into the Chalice to remind all gathered that they were united to their bishop and the other parishes of the diocese. Again, emphasizing the unity of the Church.

The Agnus Dei

The Lamb of God is a 7th century addition to the Mass. Sung or recited during the Breaking of the Bread, it is an acclamation that provides the faithful another opportunity to praise God for the sacrifice of His Son, the Lamb of God, which has won for us the gift of salvation.

Quietly the priest prays: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, through Your Death gave life to the world, free me by this, your most holy Body and Blood, from all my sins and from every evil; keep me always faithful to your commandments and never let me be parted from You.* As a sign of reverence, he genuflects.

Elevation of the Body and Blood

Having prayerfully prepared his own heart, the priest raises the Host and Chalice and proclaims: *Behold the Lamb of God; behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.* The word behold or in Latin *Ecce* should bring to mind several Scripture passages. The first, in the Gospel of John—John the Baptist points to Jesus and says “*Behold the Lamb of God.*” Then, also in the Gospel of John—Pontius Pilate presents Jesus to the jeering crowd saying “*Behold the man!*” And on Good Friday we say “*Behold the wood of the cross.*” The word “behold” has us fix our gaze on depths of a mystery—in which is revealed God's love for us.

The only possible response—*Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.* Like the many sinners Jesus welcomed to His table, so we are welcomed.

The Communion Procession and Song

As we have seen with other processions in the liturgy, the movement of the faithful towards the altar for the reception of Holy Communion has a purpose. It is not a time to greet friends and family or to contemplate the hair style or clothing of the person in front of you. It is a time to seriously reflect on what you are about to receive—the very Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Communion Song is not simply intended to cover the sound of people moving, it is to encourage contemplation on the Mystery we receive—listening to the words and signing them can help one to prepare their mind and heart to encounter the Lord who gives Himself to us.

How to Receive

The Church provides two options for receiving the Body of Christ. One may receive on the tongue or in the hand. The priest, deacon or Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion presents the Host and states—*The Body of Christ.* Names are not to be used at this moment (the Missal does not call for it) because the encounter is between the Host and communicant—not the with the minister. The communicant should loudly reply *Amen!* Which means I believe.

If receiving on the tongue, the communicant opens their mouth and extends their tongue onto which the minister places the Host.

If receiving in the hand, the communicant places their “writing hand” under their other hand into which the minister places the Host. Then using their “writing hand,” the communicant places the Host into their mouth.

Please remember that what we receive are the Body and Blood of Christ. It is incorrect to call the Sacred Species the bread and wine, and displays a level of ignorance about what is offered at this most holy time.

Return to your seat and give quiet thanks to God.

