

Liturgy and Life – Fall 2019 – How do we receive Communion?

It's been a while since I wrote any installments in my "Liturgy and Life" series. As always, if you have any questions about the meaning behind liturgical practices or customs, please let me know. I also highly recommend a video series the parishes own called "Why We Worship" by Dr. Brant Pitre. We can loan it out upon request.

I have been recently getting some questions about when and why we receive Communion under different forms (also called *kinds* or *species*). That is, sometimes we distribute just the Host (the consecrated bread) and other times both the Host and the Precious Blood (consecrated wine).

There is a lot of history behind that, but we should start with some basics: At the holy Mass, every priest is given the sacred power to transform the bread and wine offered into the Body and Blood of Christ. After he says the prayer of consecration, what is on the altar is no longer bread (even though it looks and tastes like it) but the Body of Christ. What looks like wine ceases to be wine but becomes the Blood of Christ. So it is inaccurate to say that at Communion time we are receiving "the bread" or "the wine" (as I unfortunately often hear people say). What we receive is much, much more: the True Presence of Our Lord and Savior.

At the same time, the Church has always held the doctrine (teaching) that goes by the technical name, *concomitance*. This means that since the substance of Christ present in what was formerly bread and wine is not divisible, the real presence of Christ is fully present in both the Host and Precious Blood alone. Or, perhaps a simpler way to put it, when someone receives Communion under the form of the Host alone, he is receiving the fullness of the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. Similarly, if he receives under the form of the Precious Blood alone, he is receiving the very same thing: the fullness of the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

I stress this because sometimes people complain when both forms are not offered at Mass, as if they are receiving something "less" when they receive the Host alone. This is not the case, and instead we should focus on the extraordinary gratitude that is fitting for the gift we are privileged to receive, regardless of which form it is given under.

For many centuries of the Church's history, the lay faithful were permitted to receive only the Host and not the Precious Blood. (The priest must consume both in order to effect the sacrifice of the Mass).

This practice changed only very recently, in the 1970s, when the Church in the United States allowed the Precious Blood to be distributed *as an option, at the discretion of the priest celebrant, if and only if certain conditions are met first*. I've italicized all those qualifiers, because there is some confusion here. Some people think there is a "right" to receive Communion under both forms, but this is not the case.

Why was this option introduced? There is some controversy on this question, so it depends on who you ask. Some argue that it was to make the visible symbol of Holy Communion more obvious. (For instance, it looks on the surface a bit more like what happened at the last supper when the Lord shared the Passover bread and wine with His disciples, after transforming it into His own Body and Blood). But increasing evidence points to the likelihood that many of the changes made to the form of the Mass after the Second Vatican Council were introduced to make the Mass more similar to a Protestant worship service. If we remember our history, this was one of the rallying cries of the Protestant Revolt of the 16th century: many of the Protestant reformers rejected the Church's teaching on the difference between priest and layperson, so they demanded that, because the priest received both species, the laity should too. (This is a column for another day, because ironically, they were no longer receiving the true Body and Blood of Christ).

But back to the question of the conditions that the celebrant evaluates to determine whether or not to exercise the option of distributing the Precious Blood. They're quite complicated and are detailed in several different liturgical guidelines priests must follow, but I'll summarize a few of them here.

First, there must be enough ministers to distribute both species. The deacon is the ordinary minister of the Precious Blood, but a lay minister may be appointed to do so *in the case of necessity*. The Church guidelines indicate that extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion should not be employed unless strictly necessary. (Unfortunately, this guideline is widely ignored in many parishes.) So when a deacon is not present, I often distribute just the Host. As a practical matter, at some of our Masses (especially the Saturday evening Masses) we do not have enough extraordinary ministers, so I usually suspend there as well.

Second, there must be a predictable amount of Precious Blood to be consumed. If too little wine is consecrated, then not all of the faithful will be able to receive. The guidelines indicate that there should be *unity* in the way Communion is received. So, for instance, if only half of the people end up receiving It, the Precious Blood should not be distributed. On the other hand, if too much wine is consecrated, that is even worse because it is not permitted to reserve the Precious Blood. All of It *must* be consumed during the Mass. This can be awkward, because, although it is no longer wine, it still has the effects of wine on the senses. There may be too much to easily consume. As a result, I often suspend the Precious Blood at funerals or crowded special-occasion Masses where it is unpredictable how much will be consumed.

Third, as a practical matter, it makes the Mass much more complicated. The guidelines require that all vessels, including the chalices, be thoroughly purified (cleansed of small traces of the Host and Precious Blood) during the Mass or immediately afterward by the priest or deacon. Since the priest and deacon usually greet people after the Mass, this means that the purification – a minor part of the Mass – can become unduly long. Quite frankly, I like simplicity in the Mass and don't like the extra complication of multiple vessels and extended purification.

Fourth, the instructions indicate that the Precious Blood should be treated with the utmost care. Especially with an increasing number of elderly people, with less steady hands, the risk of spilling the Precious Blood increases if it is distributed.

Much more to say on questions related to Holy Communion – because they are so important – but in the meantime, if you have any questions at all about this, please ask me after Mass or set up a time to talk to me. I am happy to make time to do so.