

The Mass (Part XXVIII)

by Fr. Tim Church

Communion (Part 1)

Following the breaking of the bread there is a brief period of preparation for receiving communion which includes a “private” prayer by the priest. Quietly he says one of the following:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit your death brought life to the world. By your holy body and blood free me from all my sins and from every evil. Keep me faithful to your teaching, and never let me be parted from you.”

or

“Lord Jesus Christ, with faith in your love and mercy, I eat your body and drink your blood. Let it not bring me condemnation, but health in mind and body.”

Then the priest genuflects and the people kneel. The priest holds the bread and wine up for the people to see and says:

*“This is the Lamb of God
who takes away the sins of the world.
Happy are those who are called to his supper.”*

The image of this statement comes from the Book of Revelation: *“Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb.” (Revelation 19:9)*

The people join the priest by saying:

“But only say the word and I shall be healed.”

This, too, echoes a verse from the Gospels: *“The centurion said in reply, ‘Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed.’”*

There are a variety of issues related to receiving communion at Mass. Our main concern here is to reflect on the liturgical actions, but we will take up a few that trouble people from time to time. The first has to do with what some call “closed communion”.

“Catholic ministers licitly administer the Sacraments only to the Catholic faithful, who likewise receive them licitly only from Catholic minister....” (**Redemptionis Sacramentum, #85 ****)

Communion is both a participation in the (effects of the) “Death of the Lord” and a sign or demonstration of our unity in communion with one another. This is the important point here. Unity of faith and participation is not merely an optimistic goal. It is a necessary requirement if we are to live as disciples. Practically, its demands include obedience to the hierarchical authority of the Catholic Church and a clear assent to the teachings of the Church. The casual receiving of communion by those who are not Catholics is a grave offense against this unity. To preserve and protect this unity is an obligation of every member of the Church. The first rule of this applies to the very foundation of any society, that our actions are based on the highest degree of honesty and integrity. Those who approach the altar are

exposing their beliefs in not only what they receive to be the body and Blood of Jesus, but also that they are joining the Holy Father, the Pope, in living according to the Lord's commands.

With the revision of the liturgy following Vatican II, permission was sought by many conferences of bishops to allow communion in the hand. It is assumed that the disciples at the Last Supper, as well as in all the earliest celebrations the Body of Christ, most likely received the Body of Christ in their hand. However, by the Middle Ages, most parts of the church were choosing to abandon this practice, with the notion that it was more respectful not to touch the host. Both practices are permitted, but both must be approached with respect.

The following very ancient commentary on receiving communion is instructive:

“When you approach, do not extend you hands with palms upward and fingers apart, but make your left hand a throne for your right hand, since the latter is to receive the King; then, while answering ‘Amen,’ receive the body of Christ in the hollow of your hand. Next, carefully sanctify your eyes through contact with the sacred body; then take it in your mouth, being watchful that nothing of it is lost.... Then, after receiving the body of Christ, approach his blood.” **(Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catechesis, 400 A.D.)**

**** Note:** *There are provisions for members of Orthodox Churches to receive Sacraments from Catholic ministers when it is impossible for them to do so in their own Churches. Permission is not necessarily automatic or assumed, however, and a conversation with a priest is necessary.*