

Believe Celebrate Live **THE EUCHARIST**

Communion

The Communion Rite

In the time of St. Justin, after the presider had offered the great prayer of thanksgiving, the people would simply approach the altar to receive Communion. But quite soon rites began to develop to solemnize this moment, to step back, as it were, and prepare for the Communion procession. These rites include moments for private preparation, and prayers that remind us that Communion is also a community act. In receiving the Body of Christ, we become the body of Christ.

The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is sung or said almost every time the Church gathers for prayer. Even when Communion is taken to the sick, the brief prayers accompanying the rite always include the Lord's Prayer. It is prayed at every Mass, when it marks the beginning of the Communion rite.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for the coming of the kingdom, an "Advent" prayer, as it were. But it is also a community prayer for reconciliation and forgiveness. When Jesus taught us to pray, he taught us to pray together: "we," not "I." He taught us to look, as a community, to the coming of the kingdom, without neglecting to ask for "our daily bread." And he taught us to seek forgiveness, not only from God but from each other: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." For St. Augustine, these words of forgiveness had special importance when the prayer was said at Mass: "As a result of these words we approach the altar with clean faces; with clean faces we share in the body and blood of Christ" (quoted in Cabié, *The Eucharist*, p. 109).

At Mass, we pray the Lord's Prayer somewhat differently from any other time. Following the last petition, "deliver us from evil," comes a prayer said

by the presider alone, called the embolism. This short prayer continues the final petition and adds a plea for peace and tranquility. After the embolism, the people conclude the prayer with another doxology, an acclamation of praise for God's kingdom, power, and glory. This added petition for peace leads us straight to the sign of peace.

Sign of Peace

The sign of peace "may have generated more opposition and controversy than any of the changes in the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council" (Champlin, *The Mystery and Meaning of the Mass*, p. 104). Shaking hands in church? Yet it is an ancient practice, vouched for by none other than St. Paul himself, who told the Romans to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16). Tertullian called the kiss of peace "a seal set upon the prayer" (quoted in Cabié, p. 114).

In the early church, the peace was exchanged before the gifts procession, in remembrance of Christ's words: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23–24, *NRSV*). In some current rites—for example, that celebrated in Zaire—it still takes place at that moment. But in our celebration of the Roman rite, as early as the time of St. Augustine this sign had been moved to follow the Lord's Prayer, and it flows naturally out of the plea for reconciliation and peace at the end of the Our Father.

The peace is a ritual moment, not "a greeting or a welcome, but rather a sign and vehicle of reconciliation" (Champlin, p. 106). As we exchange the sign of peace with those around us, we come face to face with Christ's presence in the assembly of which we are a part, a presence that at times can be

harder to grasp than his presence under the signs of a sacrament in bread and wine. The Church provides no specific words and no specific sign for this moment. This rite is celebrated by the faithful, and every community is free to pray this moment of reconciliation in its own way.

In the words of the great Holy Thursday hymn
Ubi caritas:

Therefore when we are together,
Let us take heed not to be divided in mind.
Let there be an end to bitterness and quarrels,
an end to strife,
And in our midst be Christ our God.
Where charity and love are found, there is God.
(*Sacramentary*)

The Breaking of the Bread

“Christ’s gesture of breaking bread at the Last Supper . . . gave the entire Eucharistic Action its name in apostolic times” (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM] #83*). The breaking of bread was central to St. Paul’s understanding of the church itself: “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17).

In the early church, this was a significant, even a colorful moment, when the consecrated bread and wine were divided by the priests and deacons for distribution to the faithful. In later centuries, as the faithful began to receive less often, and the cup was reserved to the priest alone, this rite became largely symbolic. The priest’s host was the only one broken, and the people were most often given Communion from reserved hosts in the ciborium (sometimes Communion was even delayed until after the dismissal!).

In the renewed liturgy, an effort has been made to restore the ancient meaning to this rite. As the bread is broken, we pray a litany: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us. . . . Grant us peace.” This litany has a different function from the Kyrie with which the Mass began and which it echoes. As Msgr. Champlin observes, “The word ‘mercy’ means more than our customary English ‘forgiveness’ or ‘compassion.’” It would be a mistake

to hear this as a plea to a just judge, a plea not to be punished. Rather, in asking Jesus the Lamb to “have mercy on us,” we are imploring “all of God’s blessings” (Champlin, pp. 107–108).

In calling on Jesus as Lamb of God, we again evoke the imagery of the heavenly liturgy, where Jesus is the Lamb who “seemed to have been slain” and yet lives (Revelation 5:6). We join our prayer to that of the countless angels who “cried out in a loud voice: Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength, honor and glory and blessing” (Revelation 5:11–12). At this moment, as we wait to come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are also, in a sense, waiting for the culmination of all things, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

Invitation to Communion

The bread is broken, the wine is poured. The priest takes the broken host and raises it, with the chalice, for all to see. Then he invites the people to Communion in words that echo the litany just prayed and the words of the angel to St. John in Revelation 19:9: “Happy are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” The people, with the priest, acknowledge their unworthiness to receive the Lord as well as their belief in the power of his presence. This prayer, based on the centurion’s prayer in Matthew 8:8, is a powerful expression of humility. It is also an expression of faith. Remember the rest of the centurion’s words to Jesus: “For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes.” The centurion’s powerful faith knows that nothing is impossible for God. Jesus can save his servant at a distance, with a word. We who receive Jesus veiled by the signs of the sacrament need to be reminded of faith like his: “Signs, not things, are all we see” (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Lauda Sion*, Sequence for Corpus Christi). Jesus granted the prayer of the centurion, saying, “Truly, I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matthew 8:10).

At this moment in the Orthodox churches, the priest exclaims, “Holy things to the holy!” It is a reminder that the assembly, too, is holy, the dwelling place of

the Spirit. It is a challenge as well, for only the holy may approach the sacrament. Lest that invitation prove too intimidating, the people's response reminds us, "One alone is holy, one alone is Lord, Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father" (quoted in Cabié, p. 117). Holiness is not something we can earn. Holiness, too, is a gift from God.

Communion Procession

From the Gospels, we know that the Last Supper was anything but a passive event. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples; they prayed together as he broke the bread; and when he foretold his betrayal, "they began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, 'Surely it is not I?'" (Mark 14:9).

For us, too, Communion is a moment of decision and action, a moment when we let Jesus serve us, when we are challenged to declare our faith in him. Communion is not brought to us where we are; we do not pass a plate along each row. No, we move, we stand up, we go forward to the altar. We make a choice. We do not receive the Body and Blood of Christ in silence, but with song and with dialogue. "The Body of Christ." "Amen." "The Blood of Christ." "Amen." These words are deceptively simple. The presence of Christ is expressed by them, in the sacrament, in the individual communicant, and in

the entire assembly in procession to receive. In our "Amen" we each actively respond, professing our belief in Christ present. "If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond 'Amen' ('yes, it is true!') and by responding to it you assent to it. . . . Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true" (St. Augustine, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1396).

The procession is an expression of community. Even as the Body of Christ is given and received, the procession itself expresses the unity of the gathered assembly. But at the same time, Communion is a private moment, when each Christian individually approaches and, one by one, receives God's own gift of self. St. Cyril, in his fourth-century instructions to the neophytes of Jerusalem, captures the wonderful mystery and intimacy of this moment: "When you approach, do not come with your hands outstretched or with your fingers open, but make your left hand a throne for the right one, which is to receive the King" (quoted in Champlin, p. 115).