

The View from the Pew Part VI: Communion and the Concluding Rites

Following the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest invites the faithful to say the Lord's Prayer together. This is appropriate before we receive Communion because we are praying for, and through the prayer, reflecting upon what we'll be receiving; namely thinking about our reverence for God; our need for forgiveness and the need to forgive one another. During the Lord's Prayer, we stand, having knelt during the Eucharistic Prayer (though in other parts of the world, people traditionally stand throughout the Eucharistic Prayer).

You may have heard differing opinions on whether to keep your hands folded or to hold hands during the Lord's Prayer. The Church is silent on this not taking an official position. My recommendation is to simply be respectful of those around us; if we are family and friends, it is often a way to symbolize unity and community and many families, couples and friends do this. However, some people prefer to keep their hands folded. Before I was ordained I preferred to do this, holding hands with family if I was at Mass with them, but not with strangers as it felt awkward to me. That's just a personal preference, but as we all pray differently we also want to be respectful of one another's spiritualities as well.

Following the Lord's Prayer, we have the Rite of Peace where we pray for unity within the whole human family. It is optional, but I try to include it unless there is a nasty cold and flu season going on. This is a great reminder that as we prepare to receive Communion, we are also called to remember that we are many parts and one body and that God loves us all. God is present in the Eucharist but also in one another which is why people deserve respect and love. The Church says that it is best to offer it "only to those who are nearest" which is why we don't spend 10 minutes shaking one another's hands everywhere in the sanctuary, but just those closest to us; and of course a "sign of peace" can also include a hug or embrace, which is what many couples and families do.

Right after this the Eucharistic Bread is broken; this is called the fraction rite. Jesus broke bread at the Last Supper, and it signifies that we are made one body. Careful observers might note the priest takes a piece of bread and drops it into the chalice. This signifies the unity of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the work of salvation and that Jesus is alive (for a body always has blood in it that is alive). We then sing or say the "Lamb of God" as a sign of reverence to honor the presence of Jesus on our altar.

As people say the "Lamb of God," I say my own prayers. I ask that as I receive Jesus, I can become more like Him and stay close to Him (the specific prayers are in the Roman Missal). I then genuflect as a sign of respect and hold the Eucharistic Bread over the chalice. Then a hymn is sung or the antiphon that is in the Roman Missal is read aloud after the priest receives Holy Communion.

Since the Second Vatican Council, people have been able to receive Communion under both forms, the bread and the wine. We receive grace fully from Jesus even if receiving one form, so this is a personal preference for you.

As for how to receive Holy Communion, the Church asks us to do the following:

The norm established for the Dioceses of the United States of America is that Holy Communion is to be received standing, unless an individual member of the faithful wishes to receive Communion while kneeling...When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence is also made before receiving the Precious Blood. (General Instruction of the Roman Missal, 150).

We remember this is a sacred moment, where Jesus is choosing to be with us. We also want to be respectful of others around us too. Practically speaking, some things to keep in mind are to consume the host immediately upon receiving it; to say “amen” to acknowledge that this is the Body of Christ, and also to remember how much God loves you. This God’s reminder to us that He is with us every step of the way to forgive us our sins, and to bring us closer to Him. We strive to become what we receive. This isn’t some representation of Jesus; this is Jesus Himself coming to be with you, because you are precious in His eyes.

A quick word on who can go to Communion. We reserve Holy Communion for Catholics because we are in full union as a community; we believe that this is the Body and Blood of Christ. We also should be properly disposed for Communion, meaning not aware of any serious or grave sin. Remember it needs to be grave in matter (not just we think it to be; that’s where a priest in confession can help you if you have a question on the seriousness of a sin); it has to be done freely and a person must know it is seriously wrong. Any priest is happy to answer questions either in confession or outside of confession if you are wondering; I also urge parents to emphasize to their children mercy and love; a young child isn’t capable of a serious sin for instance, nor can a young person get access to a car if they can’t drive to make it to Mass, so they could not commit the sin of “missing Mass on Sunday” if they can’t get there due to no transportation.

Once we receive Communion, we return to the pew to prayerfully give thanks for the love and mercy we have just welcomed into our souls.

The prayer after Communion is then said with the concluding rites which entail the greeting and blessing and reverencing of the altar. Mass then ends, and we go forth.

Next week, I’ll have a few closing “wrap up” thoughts on Mass, namely how to get the most out of it, and share some things about how the priest celebrates it in terms of what it the same and what might change slightly in each given community. Have a wonderful Labor Day weekend!

God bless,

Fr. Paul