



WELCOMING THE ROMAN MISSAL 3RD EDITION

Part VIII -- Overview of the Mass

The Communion Rite

Third Edition of the Roman Missal

The new edition of the Roman Missal will bring with it a couple of word changes in the Communion Rite.

First, a more literal rendering of the invitation to communion will make its connection to scripture more clear: John the Baptist's identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God in John 1:29 and the supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19:9. The words of the invitation to communion will be as follows:

***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.***

Second, our response to the invitation to communion will also change. The reference to the healing of the centurion's servant will be made much more clear (Luke 7:6-7). Our response will be:

***Lord, I am not worthy that you
should enter under my roof, but
only say the word and my soul
shall be healed.***

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On November 27, 2011, English-speaking Catholics in the United States will begin using a new translation of the Roman Missal (the book containing the prescribed prayers, chants, and instructions for the celebration of Mass in the Roman Catholic Church).

In the earliest celebrations of the Eucharist the presider, after the people's Amen at the conclusion of the eucharistic prayer, merely had to break the bread, after which the minister and people received the body and blood of the Lord. Over time, however, this part of the Eucharist evolved into a more developed structure in order to express our unity with one another before approaching the altar to receive Holy Communion. Today we can distinguish three major steps within the communion rite: The Preparation for Communion; the Distribution of Communion; the Period after Communion.

The Preparation for Communion

A number of prayers and actions help to prepare us to share the Lord's body and blood. These rites are intended to stir up our desire for unity, and to attune our minds and hearts to the deep meaning and demands of our participation in the Eucharist.

We begin our preparation with the Our Father. This prayer has been used by Christians since it was given by Jesus to the disciples when they asked him to teach them how to pray. It has been the constant companion of Christians for two thousand years. The prayer echoes the concerns of the Eucharistic Prayer that God be praised, that God's kingdom might come, and that God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

Immediately following the Lord's Prayer, we are all invited to share in a sign of Christ's peace. From the earliest days of the church, Christians greeted one another with the "kiss of peace." This greeting indicated that all differences were put aside. The rite of peace at this point in the Mass, is needed to help us recognize that the communion we are about to enter into is not only with God but with our neighbors. We are reminded of the admonition given to us by Jesus: "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 to be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Now is that time.

The Breaking of the Bread (accompanied by the singing of the "Lamb of God") follows the Rite of Peace. This rite, going back to the Last Supper, is the principal action for preparing for communion. So important was this action that in early Christianity the whole eucharistic celebration was known as "the breaking of the bread." St. Paul explains the meaning of the gesture: "And is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (1Cor. 10:16-17). It is an action of unity. Just as the bread has become the body of Christ, so we who share this one bread, whatever be our diversity, become one body in Christ.

Also, as a part of the breaking of the bread, the priest places a small piece of the host in the

chalice, and offers a prayer that this mingling will bring eternal life to those who receive it. This act of mingling dates back to at least the third century when the Pope would send some of the consecrated bread from his celebration of the Eucharist to the churches around the city. The particles were given to the priests who presided for other Masses that day. Before Communion, they would drop the particle into the cup as a symbol of their unity with the Pope and all other churches. As the church grew, of course, it was impossible to maintain the practice, but the symbolic act of mingling remains.

After the Breaking of the Bread and the prayers prayed privately by the priest in preparation for Communion, the priest lifts up the chalice and host and invites us to take part in the Eucharistic Banquet. Our response uses words taken from the Gospel account of the Centurion (Mt. 8:8; Lk. 7:7) who, with great humility, answers Jesus' offer to come to his house to heal his servant.

Communion

From the moment we enter the church building for Mass, we are being invited and challenged to realize that God alone sustains us. This challenges us because throughout the rest of the week we are being subtly seduced with a myriad of messages that something else sustains us -- certain clothes, a certain car, maintaining a certain weight, living in a certain area or type of home, having a certain type of job, making a certain salary. While there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things, when we trust any of them to satisfy and sustain us, we have slipped off track. We have separated ourselves from our true source -- the God who loves us. When we come to the realization that God alone can satisfy our hunger and thirst, our lives find balance. St. Augustine famously said, "Our hearts are restless, Lord, until they rest in you." We recognize that this inner restlessness is a desire for God. This same recognition leads us to overcome the temptation to allow anything else to usurp God's role as the source of our satisfaction.

Receiving communion is the ultimate acknowledgement that God is our source, is everything that we need. Communion is our act of directing all our desire to God and God's act of offering us the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation. Through our reception of Communion, we are embraced by God, who heals and satisfies our inner ache. At the same time, our reception of Communion is an embrace not only of God, but of our neighbors as well. Communion is not only a "me and God" experience. The fact that we eat from the same table and drink from one cup is a powerful expression of our communion with one another. To share a table is to enter into relationship with others. Our communion with God is thus fulfilled by loving our brothers and sisters. Communion compels us to recognize the presence of God not only in the bread and wine but also in the flesh of those we will encounter each and every day. God sent us his only Son, Jesus, to become flesh because he "so loved the world". By receiving Communion, we commit ourselves to God's love for the world -- a love that desires justice for all people.

Receiving Communion on Sunday is an expression of our commitment to enter into communion with our brothers and sisters each and every day. Within minutes of receiving communion, we will be sent forth to begin doing the work of loving God by loving our neighbors in our daily lives.

In our next installment, we'll be taking a look at the Concluding Rites of the Mass.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to "be reconciled with your brother or sister" before approaching the altar for Communion?
2. What is the significance of the breaking of the bread (or the "fraction rite")?
3. What does it mean to you that Communion is not only a "me and God" experience?