

Receiving Holy Communion

A Guide to our Belief and Practice

The Bishops of England and Wales have called all Catholics to examine the way we approach the Reception of Holy Communion. This leaflet aims at clarifying some important issues in this regard. In this leaflet you will read some explanations of the various practical points of the Church's teaching regarding Holy Communion.

Jesus's Eucharistic Presence is, of course, the priceless treasure of our Faith. Our God made us body and soul, and He comes to be with us throughout our lives in the most tangible way that we could hope or pray for. During the Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass the miracle of Transubstantiation occurs whereby bread and the wine become Christ's very Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity.

As a priest, it is a great honour indeed to witness the deep faith and love that people have for this central aspect of our Catholic Faith. However, perhaps it is also true to say that there is not always quite the right awareness of the correct practice regarding the Blessed Sacrament and our Reception of Holy Communion that there should be. Jesus praised those who honoured Him correctly because it meant they were truly appreciating what He was doing for them (Jn12:1-8). With this in mind, I will try to draw upon some of the great wealth of recent teaching on the Holy Eucharist as it refers to some vital areas of Eucharistic practice. Although it is not possible to deal with every issue in detail here, certain basic points can be explored.

Why do I have to genuflect when I come into the church?

A genuflection is the action begun from a standing position in which a worshipper moves his or her right foot back a step, drops the right knee briefly to the floor, and then stands upright again. Most people naturally bow their head while performing this action; others make the Sign of the Cross; some hold onto a nearby pew for physical support. The purpose of genuflection is for the person to worship Jesus Christ truly present in the Holy Eucharist in the Tabernacle behind the Altar. We *never* bow to Jesus in the Tabernacle, unless medically we are unable to genuflect. We genuflect to Jesus when we arrive in the church and when we leave, and also when we enter and leave the Sanctuary area of the Church.

Can I chat to people in the church when I come to Mass?

We should not chat in church. Understandably, there is the temptation to have a conversation with our family and friends who we see at Mass. This is fine in the porch

or in the front room of the church house, but we should refrain from doing so in the church itself. The church is the place we enter to pray before the Tabernacle, Our Lord's earthly home and dwelling place. It is His church not ours. It also disturbs others who are trying to pray. We can draw a parallel from everyday life in that chatting in a library disturbs those who are trying to read and so is discouraged.

Can I receive Holy Communion more than once on the same day?

Yes. We may go to Holy Communion twice on the same day, as long as the second time is within Mass (1983 Code of Canon Law 917).

How often should I receive?

The Church now encourages us to receive as often as we can; daily if possible (Catechism 1389). At the very least, we are obliged to receive Holy Communion once a year, preferably around the time of Easter (1983 Code of Canon Law 920).

Do I still need to fast before receiving Holy Communion?

Yes. In the past Catholics had to fast from midnight. Now we need to abstain from all food and drink for only one hour beforehand, although we can still drink water and take medicine. This one hour fast does not apply to the sick in their homes or hospital, or those who must care for them. (1983 Code of Canon Law 919).

What happens if I miss Sunday Mass or Mass on a Holy Day of Obligation? Do I still need to go to Mass every Sunday? Isn't once or twice in the month enough?

Occasionally we miss Mass because we are ill, or we have to care for someone else who is ill, or we have another serious reason for not participating in Sunday Mass, or Mass on a Holy Day of Obligation. Of course on these occasions we would not be sinning and so the next time we come to Mass we will be able to receive Holy Communion (Catechism 2181). If we cannot get to Sunday Mass on a regular basis, perhaps because of shift work, or another serious reason, then we should mention this to the parish priest who can give a Dispensation. He might ask us to read the Sunday Gospel and spend some time in prayer in our own time, or to participate in a weekday Mass instead. However, the Church insists that to *deliberately* miss Sunday Mass or Mass on a Holy Day of Obligation, even once, *for no serious reason*, is to commit a mortal sin (Catechism 2181). This is because the Third Commandment is, "Take care to keep holy the Sabbath day as the Lord, your God, commanded you." (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). We are also obliged by the commandment of Jesus to love God before all else (Matthew 22:35-38). We are asked to give up only one hour out of 168 in a week on the day that Jesus made holy by His Resurrection from the dead. On this day, Sunday, we follow the Lord's command to meet for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist (Luke 22:19) which we see happening in the very early Church (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). By following the Lord's command we give God His proper

place in our lives. If we choose not to go, we are ultimately saying that this most holy act whereby we come face-to-face with Jesus Himself, and what He did for us on the Cross, is not important enough to give up one hour of a 168 hour week for. We are also saying that our fellow Catholics are not worthy of our joining them publicly in worshipping God either.

Do I need to go to Confession if I have a mortal sin on my conscience, before receiving Holy Communion?

“Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to Holy Communion” (Catechism 1385). It is a very serious sin (sacrilege) to receive Jesus in such a state and will do us no good whatsoever. In fact St. Paul tells us that we are putting our spiritual lives in grave danger by doing so (1 Corinthians 11:27-30). If, for a serious reason, we desire to receive Holy Communion in this state, we should make a “*perfect act of contrition*” (Catechism 1457), which includes the firm purpose of going to Confession as soon as possible afterwards.

Can I receive Holy Communion if I am presently living in a relationship not actually recognised by the Church, such as living with someone outside of the Sacrament of Matrimony?

No. A valid Marriage between a man and a woman has always been upheld as unique in Catholic Christianity. It alone is the God-made institution for sexual expression. It would be seriously wrong to knowingly carry on receiving Holy Communion in any form of sexual relationship not recognised by the Church. The late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II re-iterated this truth in his Letter “*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*” (37). “. . . those who ‘obstinately persist in manifest grave sin’ are not to be admitted to Eucharistic communion”.

What if I am divorced?

Very often a Marriage breaks down through the wrongdoing of one spouse. The Church is the first to recognise the anguish and distress of the innocent party. There is, of course, normally nothing here to stop us receiving Holy Communion, as long as we do not remarry outside of the Church.

Should I make an act of reverence when I receive Holy Communion?

Yes. The General Instruction to the New Missal, published in English in 2005, says that when we are about to receive Holy Communion we should make “*an appropriate sign of reverence*” before receiving (160). The best sign of reverence is to kneel. However in churches which have scrapped the altar rails Holy Communion is received standing. If you stand, you should make a deep bow, or make a Sign of the Cross before receiving Holy Communion.

Does it make any difference whether I receive Holy Communion on the tongue or in the hand?

According to the recent Vatican Instruction, “*Redemptionis Sacramentum*” the best way to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion is to receive Him on the tongue. In certain countries, as in England, the Bishops have given permission for people to receive in the hand if they so wish. However, the priest has the duty not to give in the hand if he judges there is any danger of profanation. Please ensure your hands are clean, meaning that they are not dirty or are covered with handwriting.

If I cannot receive Holy Communion for some reason, what should I do?

Pope John Paul II wrote in his Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (34) that, “. . . it is good to cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist. This was the origin of the practice of “spiritual communion”, which has happily been established in the Church for centuries and recommended by saints who were masters of the spiritual life. Saint Teresa of Jesus wrote: ‘When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you.’”

Some Holy Communion Prayers

May the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament be praised, adored, and loved with grateful affection at every moment in all the Tabernacles of the world, now and until the end of time. Amen.

Lord Jesus Christ, You gave us the Eucharist as the memorial of Your suffering and death. May our worship of this Sacrament of Your Body and Blood help us to experience the salvation You won for us and the peace of the Kingdom where You live with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine!

A Spiritual Communion - I wish, my Lord, to receive You with the purity, humility and devotion with which Your most Holy Mother received You, with the spirit and fervour of the saints. Amen.

My Jesus, I believe that You are truly present in the Most Holy Sacrament. I love You above all things, and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot this moment receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as being already there and unite myself to You. Amen.