

How to Receive the Eucharist

When I gave the talk about the proper way of receiving the Eucharist, I wanted to encourage you not to think about it as a criticism, and especially not to think: “Oh, my, Father has me directly in mind, I know he’s directing what he’s saying at me”, but rather to take it as an opportunity to grow together as a community of believers, who recognize that God is truly an Emmanuel, God with us, through His presence in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. After all, receiving Communion is not an act of our private devotion, but rather one of the entire Church. Therefore, receiving Communion is an act of union with God and the Church herself, and the manner of expressing it. There are no flagrant violations or extreme problems here, but it’s always good to remind ourselves of what happens when we receive the Eucharist and how we should receive it.

Living in the US for over 10 years now I have learned a saying that “Familiarity breeds contempt.” Not that we have contempt for the Eucharist, but we receive it so often that we can become thoughtless and careless about it. I know it myself, because as a Priest, I receive Eucharist every day, and it’s very easy to become casual in the way I receive the Eucharist.

If you were to ask me what two dispositions are absolutely necessary to approach the table of the Lord, I would say without hesitation that the first is **Faith** – deep belief in our Lord who is truly present, body and soul, humanity and divinity who becomes present at the moment the words of Consecration are being said by a Priest, and who comes into our lives, into our very beings, assimilates us into himself, through the reception of the Eucharist. That is whom we are receiving. We celebrate what Jesus enacted at the Last Supper and on Calvary.

The second disposition with which we ought to approach the Eucharist, stemming out of faith, is **Devotion**. You know each of us is baptized into the priesthood of Jesus, and one of the ways in which ordinary baptized Catholics exercise that priesthood is by receiving Holy Communion. That is the exercise of a power we have from Christ. It’s an act of worship. We come with devotion, we come with humility. We come with great reverence and respect. I think that’s what many people complain about in our modern liturgy, the fact that the sense of reverence, of dignity, of awe, has disappeared. But that’s more in our disposition than in anything else.

Now there are two practical ways in which Communion is received in the Latin Church in the United States: we receive either **on the tongue** or **in the hand**. The priest holds up the Host and says, “The Body of Christ”, and the communicant, the person receiving the Eucharist, answers, “Amen”, which means, “So be it”, “I agree”, “I believe”, “It is the Body of Christ”. In the context of receiving the Eucharist the “Amen” means: “I honestly believe that when I receive, it is Christ, and so I say Amen.” The communicant is the one who makes that decision. It is the individual who decides how he is going to receive.

If you are going to receive on the tongue, you should keep certain things in mind. First, the proper posture to receive on tongue is kneeling, the head should be held erect, but slightly tilted back. The tongue should come out over the bottom teeth and rest on your bottom lip, so that the priest has some place to put the Host. If you are unable to kneel, you still can receive on tongue.

When receiving Communion on the tongue there are a few things to avoid: there are people who act like a *snapping turtle*, closing their mouth so quickly that the Priest is afraid his fingers are

going to be cut off by the teeth. There are also the *plungers*; they leap forward, or you have the *dancers* or *moving targets*, who are unable to hold still, making it necessary for a Priest to practice his aiming skills.

There are also certain things that we Priests have observed regarding receiving Communion on hand. Some people receive on the run, they don't stand squarely in front of the Priest but they stand as if they can't wait to get away. On the other hand, some communicants take way too much time in front of the Priest, slowing down the flow of Communion. Some are not extending their hands far enough, making it difficult to reach, others come too close, leaving no space between a Priest and themselves. Others, upon receiving Jesus in their hands, make with it the Sign of the Cross, risking dropping the Body of Christ to the floor, or even accidentally hitting the ciborium held by the Priest, and knocking it out of his hands.

If you're going to receive in the hand, the best way is to put your dominant hand down and put the other hand on top of it and make a kind of throne for the Lord. When the Priest puts the Host on your hand, you say, "Amen", receive our Lord immediately, before moving, but also without taking unnecessarily long to do so. Communion should not be received on the run, as you're walking back to your place, but it should be consumed before you leave the area where the Communion is distributed. Please, make sure you move immediately after receiving Communion, without interfering with the flow. There's no need of blessings yourselves with the Sign of the Cross, as you have just received the greatest of blessings, God within you.

I would like to remind you to indicate clearly how you wish to receive. Sometimes communicants come up with their hands out and their mouths open, and the priest doesn't know which way to give the Host. If you indicate clearly, it's easier. If you're going to receive in the hand, be clear about where the Host should be placed so that it doesn't accidentally fall. If it should fall on the floor, indicate it to the Priest or the Extraordinary Minister, as they may not have seen it. That should be the overwhelming disposition with which we approach Holy Communion: "It is the Lord!"

If you're receiving Communion on tongue and kneeling remember that, when you rise, you have people behind you. Sometimes those who kneel to receive take a step or two back when they rise. So remember to rise straight up, thinking about the person right behind you. Also, if you are behind someone receiving while kneeling, make sure to give them enough space to stand up, rather than risking receiving a kick to the shin.

It is not necessary to genuflect before receiving Communion, but it is necessary to make some gesture of reverence if you are to receive the Eucharist in hand. Two most common ways to reverence the Real Presence of the Lord is either genuflecting or bowing. There shouldn't be any genuflections after receiving Holy Eucharist: you don't want to genuflect to the tabernacle, because the Lord is within you – you are the tabernacle.

To sum it up, the two main dispositions that we need are faith and devotion. It is the Lord that we are worshipping. It is the Lord that we are receiving into ourselves. It is the Lord who is giving us in the Eucharist a special way to participate in divine life. It is the Lord who is sanctifying us. That should be the overwhelming disposition with which we approach Holy Communion: "It is the Lord!"