

The Mass In Slow Motion

Volume 23

The Reception of Communion

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. This series will follow the Mass in order beginning with The Gathering Rite through The Final Blessing and Dismissal, approximately 25 volumes. Previous editions are available via the rectory office or our website: www.hscchurch.org.

The reception of Holy Communion by the priest and faithful is actually a series of rites that we look at one by one below.



The Angus Dei - Just after the sign of peace, the Agnus Dei (Lamb of God) is said or sung. It is a hymn to accompany the "breaking of the bread." It arose in the 7th Century and Pope Sergius seems to have introduced it in response to the fact that the breaking of the bread was a lengthy procedure in those days. Today the individual hosts are already broken into small round pieces and the priest only breaks the one larger host. The hymn was probably borrowed from the Syrian liturgy and is scripturally rooted in John the Baptist's declaration in John 1:23, 36: "Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." This phrase (Lamb of God) is also referenced in I Cor 5:7, Rev 5:6 and 13:8. Originally, everyone, usually in alternation, sang it with the choir. The repetition was increased according to the length of the breaking. But as we have seen in other areas of the Mass, complex melodies developed and the choir alone soon came to sing it. The length grew shorter as the number of communicants decreased. The phrase "Grant us peace" seems to have emerged from the fact that until 1970, the sign of peace was after the Lamb of God (today it is before) and thus this phrase anticipated that fact. Today, the form is once again sung with as many acclamations as necessary to accompany the gesture.

Breaking of the Bread. During the singing of the Lamb of God, the Priest takes the host and breaks it over the paten. This gesture of Christ at the Last Supper gave the entire Eucharistic action its name in apostolic times, where it was called "The Breaking of the Bread. In addition to its practical aspect, it signifies that in communion we who are many are made one body in the one bread of life which is Christ. (I Cor. 10:17)

The Commingling involves the priest breaking off a small particle from the host and dropping it in the chalice to "commingle" it with the precious blood. It is rooted in an ancient practice of the Church in Rome. A priest who was unable for some reason to celebrate Mass with the Pope received a small particle of the consecrated host from the papal Mass called the fermentum. The priest then placed this particle in his own chalice as a sign of unity with the pope. Later, this practice was carried forth in taking a particle from a previous Mass to show forth the unity of all Masses as the One Sacrifice. In later years a thinking developed which reasoned that since the double consecration symbolized the death (because the body and blood were consecrated "separately"), another gesture ought to symbolize the resurrection. Thus, this gesture came to symbolize the resurrection as body and blood are brought together again.

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Private Preparation of the Priest and People. The priest prepares himself to receive the body and blood of Christ by praying quietly. The faithful also do this by praying in silence. The Priest says quietly one of two prayers printed in the altar missal. Sometimes this prayer is done during the Lamb of God which is really a congregational hymn. These prayers developed in France during the Middle Ages and were meant to foster the devotion and piety of the priest. They are said quietly for two reasons. First, they are private prayers of the priest. It may give the people time to quietly prepare. Consider that, too frequently, this is a rushed and not very prayerful time. It is seldom experienced as a time of quiet preparation. Hence, we should strive to be reflective in the moments just prior to receiving communion.

The Invitation to Communion. The priest then shows the Eucharistic Bread to the faithful. He invites them to participate in the meal and leads them to an act of humility, using words from the gospel: “Lord I am not worthy...” . Facing the people, he raises the host slightly over the paten and says: “This is the Lamb of God...” . With the people he adds: “Lord I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” The invitation and response are scriptural. The invitation is that of John the Baptist (John1:29) “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*” The response is the declaration of the Roman Soldier (Matt 8:9) “*Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.*”



Distribution of Communion. The priest first reverently receives his own communion saying as he does, “May the Body (Blood) of Christ bring me to everlasting life.” After this he takes the paten or other vessel and goes to the communicants saying: “The Body of Christ.” The communicant replies: “Amen.” Communion under both kinds (Host and cup) is permitted and encouraged (cf GIRM 240-242).

The faithful may receive the Eucharist either kneeling or standing. When the faithful communicate kneeling no other sign of reverence towards the Blessed Sacrament is required since kneeling itself is an act of adoration. When they receive standing, it is required that, coming up in procession, they should make a sign of reverence before receiving the sacrament.

Pastoral reflections. This moment in the mass requires a number of “mechanical” things as noted above. Thus the danger ensues that the priest and the faithful can be rushed and unreflective. It is essential to guard from this danger by striving to be as reflective and prayerful as possible.

In addition, a song is usually to be sung at this time. Preferably it is a song well known and/or with a refrain so that the faithful do not have to tote a book along in the Eucharistic procession. But singing too, is a way to prayerfully prepare, since by it, we are praising the God who is about to feed us.

After receiving communion mindfully, and prayerfully the faithful return to their pews for continuing prayer and praise. Usually after all have received, the congregation is seated and there is a brief time of reflection. We do well to consider what and who we have just received.