

First Eucharist

Session 4 – The Communion Rite

Goals and Objectives for Session Four

The goal of this session is to enable people to understand the Communion Rite so that it has the power to shape them into a people of mutual love and reconciliation and to live as a eucharistic people in the world. The objectives are:

- To pray the Lord's prayer with hope for the heavenly banquet to come
- To understand the Sign of Peace as a sacred action where we express our mutual love and reconciliation
- To appreciate the communal dimension of the communion rite
- To motivate people to eat and drink of the body and blood of Christ weekly
- To empower them to participate fully in the Communion Rite
- To empower them to live as a eucharistic people in the world.

The Communion Rite of the Mass

We have gathered as the Body of Christ. We have listened to God speaking to us. The great prayer of praise and thanksgiving has been prayed in our name by the priest. Now, says the Church, we have reached the culmination point of the Mass. It is the Communion Rite. All that we have done up to this point prepares us for this part of the Mass.

The Communion Rite has the following parts.

1. Lord's Prayer
2. Sign of Peace
3. Breaking of the bread
4. Communion
5. Silence
6. Prayer after Communion

What Does the Church Teach?

The Church considers this part of the Mass to be the culminating point of the liturgy. Too often, however, the Communion Rite marks a transition from communal prayer to a time of personal prayer with communion being a personal action between the communicant and God.

The liturgical reform following the Second Vatican Council restored the essential components of this Rite, which had been lost in the course of time. The reform points out that the reception together of the Lord's body and blood in a paschal meal is the

culmination of the Eucharist. Those present are made ready to share in the banquet by a Rite that leads us from the Eucharistic prayer directly to communion.

To eat and drink of the body and blood of Christ is to engage in a most sacred action. We must prepare in a special way to do this. We must be properly disposed. We must be made ready to share in this meal. The *Introduction to the Order of Mass* (IOM) states that “This rite expresses the mutual love and reconciliation that are both the condition and the fruit of worthy communion and the unity of the many in the one symbolized at both the natural and the sacramental level in the elements of bread and wine” (IOM, 125).

In other words, before we eat and drink of the body and blood of Christ we must express our mutual love and reconciliation with one another. This is a **CONDITION** for communion. For how can we receive the “sacrament of unity” if indeed we are not united in love and reconciliation with one another? At the same time the fruit (result) of our eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ is the mutual love and reconciliation with one another which intensifies our unity.

Preparation for Communion

Thus before we receive the body and blood of Christ we participate in three very important actions. We pray the Lord’s Prayer, exchange the Sign of Peace, and participate in the Breaking of the Bread.

Lord’s Prayer

When we pray the Lord’s prayer we proclaim our belief in the heavenly banquet. Before we eat and drink of Christ’s banquet here on earth, we remember why we are doing this. We do this because we hope to participate in the heavenly banquet at the end of time. “Because of its themes of daily bread and mutual forgiveness, the Lord’s Prayer has been used in all liturgical traditions as a most appropriate preparation for Holy Communion, ‘so that what is holy may, in fact, be given to those who are holy’” (IOM, 126).

Sign of Peace

Having proclaimed our belief in the heavenly banquet, we exchange the sign of peace. We manifest our love and reconciliation with our neighbor. We acknowledge that the Christ whom we receive in the sacrament is already present in our neighbor. We proclaim our “communion” with our brothers and sisters, which is a condition for our communion with Christ. Thus the sign of peace is a very sacred moment in the Communion Rite. It is not a greeting, a time to say “hello,” nor should it be trivialized with inappropriate words and gestures. In the Sign of Peace we express our belief that we are members, one with another, in the Body of Christ.

Breaking of the Bread

In the time of the apostles, the phrase “breaking of the bread” was given to the entire celebration of the Eucharist. Unfortunately, sometimes this action is reduced to the “functional” activity of putting the consecrated hosts into individual vessels. This is not its true meaning, however. In this most sacred moment we proclaim that the Christ we believe in is the Christ whose body was broken for us and whose blood was poured out for us. For this reason the priest holds up the consecrated bread and breaks it for all to see. In this action, we unite our own brokenness with that of Christ. During the breaking of the bread we sing a litany to accompany this action called the “Agnus Dei” (Lamb of God).

It is important to understand that the human sign of bread naturally lends itself to our understanding of the Eucharist. In the making of bread, grains of wheat are ground, kneaded, and baked to become one loaf. In the eating of bread, it must be broken and shared for others to partake. For this reason the bread sign we use at liturgy has the following requirements: it must be made only of wheat (and water); it must be recently baked; it must be unleavened; it must have the appearance of real food (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal* [GIRM], 319-321).

It is also important to note that the purpose of the entire eucharistic celebration is to share the body and blood of Christ. Thus we receive communion from bread and wine consecrated at that Mass. Hosts should never be taken from the tabernacle during Mass unless there is an emergency.

Communion

Communion begins while the priest is receiving communion. At this most sacred time of unity, the community prays with one voice. This is called the communion song. It begins immediately while the priest receives communion. The unity of the Body of Christ is made real in our eating and drinking of the body and blood of Christ together, our prayer together (the communion song), and our common posture (standing). In the United States the approved form is communion in the hand, but one may receive communion on the tongue if he/she chooses to do so. In the Catholic tradition we never self-communicate.

Communion has many levels of meaning. We eat and drink of the body and blood of Christ. We are nourished and fed on Christ’s body. At the same time we truly become that which we eat—the Body of Christ. Listen to the words of St. Augustine:

“If that is so, it is the sacrament of yourselves that is placed on the Lord’s altar, and it is the sacrament of yourselves that you receive. You reply ‘amen’ to what you are, and thereby agree that such you are. You heard the words ‘the body of Christ,’ and you reply ‘amen.’ Be, then, a member of Christ’s body, so that your ‘amen’ may accord with the truth.”

Thus our AMEN in response to “the Body of Christ,” “the Blood of Christ” is an assent to all of the above.

Silence or Song of Praise

Following communion we sit in silence together to allow the tremendous reality of what has just occurred to seep into every part of our being. This is a special time for interior prayer and contemplation. The period of silence may be replaced by a song of praise.

Prayer after Communion

Here the priest prays for the community of faith, asking that the spiritual effects of the Eucharist be experienced in the lives of the faithful (IOM, 140).

Concluding Rites

After the greeting and the blessing we are dismissed, not only from Mass, but to go out and LIVE what we have just prayed: to gather others together, to proclaim God's living Word in the world; to be Eucharist in the world, to feed others on many levels, and to pour ourselves out for others. To truly live the Eucharist, we need to come back every Sunday to be fed and nourished by God's living Word and by the body and blood of Christ.

(Source: Linda Gaupin, Embracing the Vision: Sacramental Catechesis for First Reconciliation and First Communion)