



# WORTHY RECEPTION OF HOLY COMMUNION

A SERVICE OF CATHOLICS UNITED FOR THE FAITH

## ISSUE

What conditions are necessary for the worthy reception of Holy Communion?

## RESPONSE

The Church exhorts Catholics to examine their consciences, “discern the Body” and fast in order to receive Holy Communion worthily.

## DISCUSSION

Writing around the year 57 to “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1Cor. 1:2), St. Paul praises the Christians there for maintain the traditions he had delivered to them when he preached the Gospel there six years earlier (1 Cor. 11:2).<sup>1</sup> He rebukes the Corinthians, however, for their divisions and liturgical abuses (1 Cor. 11:17-22).

St. Paul does not consider liturgical abuses to be a trivial matter, for they violate the sacredness of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which shows forth Christ’s death again and again until the end of time (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23-26). In particular, unworthy reception of Holy Communion profanes the Body and Blood of the Lord. “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (1 Cor. 11:27-30).

In urging the faithful to prepare themselves for Holy Communion, St. Paul follows the example of Our Lord on Holy Thursday: “Before He gave to His

Apostles the Sacrament of His precious body and blood, although they were already clean, He washed their feet to show that we must use extreme diligence before Holy Communion in order to approach it with the greatest purity and innocence of soul.”<sup>2</sup>

Preparation of Soul: “Let a Man Examine Himself”

Christ’s invitation to receive Holy Communion – “Take this” (Lk. 22:17), for “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you” (Jn. 6:53) – demands a worthy response. Following St. Paul, the Church teaches that this worthy response entails making an examination of conscience before receiving Holy Communion. In making this examination, the faithful should discern whether they have committed any unconfessed mortal sins. In 1551, the Council of Trent decreed:

Wherefore, he who would communicate, ought to recall to mind the precept of the Apostle: *Let a man prove himself* (1 Cor. 11:28). Now ecclesiastical usage declares that necessary proof to be, that no one, conscious to himself of mortal sin, how contrite soever he may seem to himself, ought to approach to the sacred Eucharist without previous sacramental confession. This the holy Synod hath decreed is to be invariably observed by all Christians, even by those priests on whom it may be incumbent by their office to celebrate, provided the opportunity of a confessor do not fail them; but if, in urgent necessity, a priest should celebrate without previous confession, let him confess as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For the date of composition of 1 Corinthians, see C. Aherne, “Epistles to the Corinthians,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York; Robert Appleton, 1908), available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04364a.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> “The Holy Eucharist,” *Roman Catechism* (1566), available online at

<http://www.cin.org/users/james/ebooks/master/trent/tiindex.htm>. All quotes herein from the *Roman Catechism* are taken from this section on the Holy Eucharist.

<sup>3</sup> Thirteenth Session, Chapter 7, available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.vi.i.vi.html?bcb=0>. Cf. Code of Canon Law (1983), canon 916: “A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to celebrate Mass or

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“Anyone conscious of a grave sin,” the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms, “must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion.”<sup>4</sup>

The Church also exhorts the faithful to reflect upon their charity toward God and neighbor before receiving Holy Communion. Our Lord warns His followers to be reconciled with their brothers before offering their gifts at the altar (Mt. 5:23-24); He cautions His disciples not to partake of the Eucharistic marriage feast without the wedding garment of charity (Mt. 22:1-14). Thus “another very necessary preparation is to ask ourselves if we are at peace with and sincerely love our neighbor...We should also put the question to ourselves whether we can truly say with Peter: *Lord, thou knowest that I love thee* (Jn. 21:15-17), and should recollect that he who sat down at the banquet of the Lord without a wedding garment was cast into a dark dungeon and condemned to eternal torments.”<sup>5</sup>

### Preparation of Soul: “Discerning the Body”

Again following St. Paul, the Church exhorts the faithful to discern the Body of the Lord so as to receive Holy Communion worthily. This discernment consists in reflecting upon both the majesty of the Blessed Sacrament and our own unworthiness to receive it:

The first preparation, then, which the faithful should make, is to distinguish table from table, this sacred table from profane tables, this celestial bread from common bread. This we do when we firmly believe that there is truly present the body and blood of the Lord, of Him whom the Angels adore in heaven, at whose nod the pillars of heaven fear and tremble, of whose glory the heavens and the earth are full. This is to discern the body of the Lord in accordance with the admonition of the Apostle. We

should venerate the greatness of the mystery rather than too curiously investigate its truth by idle inquiry...We should also reflect in the silence of our own hearts how unworthy we are that the Lord should bestow on us this divine gift.<sup>6</sup>

The sacred liturgy assists the faithful in making this discernment. The *Catechism* teaches, “Before so great a sacrament, the faithful can only echo humbly and with ardent faith the words of the Centurion...’Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul will be healed.’”<sup>7</sup>

Discerning the Body helps ensure that the faithful approach Holy Communion with the necessary dispositions. Over the centuries, some have held that no internal dispositions are required to receive Communion and that everyone ought to receive Communion at every Mass. Others, influenced by the heresy of Jansenism, have held that very few Catholics were worthy to receive Communion frequently. Opposing both of these errors, Pope St. Pius X set forth clearly the dispositions necessary to receive Holy Communion:

Frequent and daily Communion, as a practice most earnestly desired by Christ our Lord and by the Catholic Church, should be open to all the faithful, of whatever rank and condition of life; so that no one who is in the state of grace, and who approaches the Holy Table with a right and devout intention can be prohibited therefrom. A right intention consists in this: that he who approaches the Holy Table should do so, not out of routine, or vainglory, or human respect, but that he wish to please God, to be more closely united with Him by charity, and to have recourse to this divine remedy for his weakness and defects.<sup>8</sup>

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receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition which includes the resolution of confession as soon as possible.” The Code is available online at <http://www.vatican.va/archive/cdc/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1997), no. 1385. The *Catechism* is available online at <http://www.vatican.va.archive.ccc/index.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> *Roman Catechism*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism*, no. 1386.

<sup>8</sup> St. Pius X, Decree on Frequent and Daily Reception of Holy Communion, *Sacra Tridentina*, 1905, available online

### Preparation of Body: The Eucharistic Fast

The liturgical abuses in Corinth, which included drunkenness (1 Cor. 11:21-22), pointed to the desirability of fasting in preparation for Holy Communion. For most of the Church's history, Catholics were required to fast from midnight on days on which they wished to receive Holy Communion,<sup>9</sup> though in 1416 the Council of Constance modified the fast "in case of illness or of some other necessity conceded or admitted by right or by the Church."<sup>10</sup> Pope Pius XII shortened the Eucharistic fast to three hours in some circumstances in 1953 and more generally in 1957.<sup>11</sup> Pope Paul VI's further mitigation of the fast to one hour has become part of the Church's current canonical discipline:

§1. A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain from at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine.

§2. A priest who celebrates the Most Holy Eucharist two or three times on the same day can take something before the second or third celebration even if there is less than one hour between them.

§3. The elderly, the infirm, and those who care for them can receive the Most Holy Eucharist even if they have eaten something within the preceding hour.<sup>12</sup>

Whatever be the length of the fast, the teaching Church has put forward several reasons for its appropriateness:

Abstinence from food and drink is in accord with that supreme reverence we owe to the supreme majesty of Jesus Christ when we are going to receive Him hidden under the veils of the Eucharist. And

moreover, when we receive His Precious Body and Blood before we take any food, we show clearly that this is the first and loftiest nourishment by which our soul is fed and its holiness increased...

Not only does the Eucharistic fast pay due honor to our Divine Redeemer, it fosters piety also; and hence it can help to increase in us those most salutary fruits of holiness which Christ, the Source and Author of all good, wishes us who are enriched by His Grace to bring forth.

Moreover, everyone with experience will recognize that, by the very laws of human nature, when the body is not weighted down by food the mind more easily is lifted up and is by a more ardent virtue moved to meditate upon that hidden and transcendent Mystery that works in the soul, as in a temple, to the increase of divine charity.<sup>13</sup>

### Admission to Holy Communion

According to Church discipline, any of the baptized who are "not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion."<sup>14</sup>

Canon law requires that children, before being admitted to Holy Communion in the Roman rite, must "have sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion."<sup>15</sup> Parents primarily and pastors secondarily have the duty of preparing children for worthy reception of Holy Communion after First Confession. At the same time, the pastor must "exercise vigilance so that children who have not attained the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed do not approach holy communion."<sup>16</sup>

Canon law also states that "those who have been excommunicated or interdicted after the imposition

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at <http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc-view.cfm?recnum=5195>.

<sup>9</sup> This is attested to in the writings of Tertullian, St. Hippolytus, and St. Augustine. See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, 1955, 1974), p. 399.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Pope Pius XII, Apostolic Constitution Concerning the Discipline to be Observed with Respect to the Eucharistic Fast, *Christus Dominus*, 1953, available online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papal doc/p12chdom.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> *Christus Dominus* and Motu Proprio on Laws of Fasting and the Evening Mass, *Sacram Communionem*, 1957, available online at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papal doc/p12fast.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Canon 919.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Christus Dominus*.

<sup>14</sup> Canon 912.

<sup>15</sup> Canon 913 §1.

<sup>16</sup> Canon 914.

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or declaration of the penalty and others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to holy communion.”<sup>17</sup>

Commentary on this canon appeared in the Catholic and secular press during the 2004 American presidential campaign. In discussing the statement that “others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to holy communion,” some commentators held that no Catholic should ever be denied Holy Communion. Because grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent are the conditions necessary for a mortal sin,<sup>18</sup> and because a minister of Holy Communion cannot judge whether a sin has been committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent, no Catholic who has attained the use of reason (these commentators argued) should ever be denied Holy Communion. In other words, the statement that “others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to holy communion” is in essence meaningless because no one can judge whether another soul is in a state of mortal sin.

In 2000, the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, “in agreement with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and with the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments,” declared that such commentary on the canon is “clearly misleading”:

One cannot confuse respect for the wording of the law with the improper use of the very same working as an instrument for relativizing the precepts or emptying them of their substance. The phrase “and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin” is clear and must be understood

in a manner that does not distort its sense so as to render the norm inapplicable.<sup>19</sup>

In refuting this misinterpretation of the canon, the pontifical council discussed the theological basis of the canon and offered directives in implementing it.

First, the obligation to deny Holy Communion to those who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin is a matter of divine law and not merely of ecclesiastical discipline; the text of St. Paul quoted above (1 Cor. 11:27-30) binds both those who receive and those who administer Holy Communion.<sup>20</sup>

The pontifical council also explained the meaning of the phrase “obstinately persist in manifest grave sin”. The three required conditions are:

1. Grave sin, understood objectively, being that the minister of Communion would not be able to judge from subjective imputability;
2. Obstinate persistence, which means the existence of an objective situation of sin that endures in time and which the will of the individual member of the faithful does not bring to an end, no other requirements (attitude of defiance, prior warning, etc.) being necessary to establish the fundamental gravity of the situation in the Church;
3. The manifest character of the situation of grave habitual sin.

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<sup>17</sup> Canon 915.

<sup>18</sup> *Catechism*, no. 1857.

<sup>19</sup> Declaration by the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts (2000), available online at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/intrptxt/documents/rc\\_pc\\_intrptxt\\_doc\\_2000706\\_declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/intrptxt/documents/rc_pc_intrptxt_doc_2000706_declaration_en.html). The subsequent two block quotations are also from this document.

<sup>20</sup> “The prohibition found in the cited canon, by its nature, is derived from divine law and transcends the domain of positive ecclesiastical laws: the latter cannot introduce legislative changes which would oppose the doctrine of

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the Church. The scriptural text on which the ecclesial tradition has always relied is that of St. Paul...This text concerns in the first place the individual faithful and their moral conscience...But the unworthiness that comes from being in a state of sin also poses a serious juridical problem in the Church...In effect, the reception of the Body of Christ when one is publicly unworthy constitutes an objective harm to the ecclesial communion: it is a behavior that affects the rights of the Church and of all the faithful to live in accord with the exigencies of that communion.”

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The pontifical council urged pastors to exercise charity, prudence, and firmness in implementing the canon:

Naturally, pastoral prudence would strongly suggest the avoidance of instances of public denial of Holy Communion. Pastors must strive to explain to the concerned faithful the true ecclesial sense of the norm, in such a way that they would be able to understand it or at least respect it. In those situations, however, in which these precautionary measures have not had their effect or in which they were not possible, the minister of Communion must refuse to distribute it to those who are publicly unworthy. They are to do this with extreme charity, and are to look for the opportune moment to explain the reasons that required the refusal. They must, however, do this with firmness, conscious of the value that such signs of

strength have for the good of the Church and of souls.

Finally, the pontifical council stated that the obligation to deny Holy Communion falls to the priest who leads the community and that on other ecclesiastical authority may interfere with this duty:

The discernment of cases in which the faithful who find themselves in the described condition are to be excluded from Eucharistic Communion is the responsibility of the Priest who is responsible for the community. They are to give precise instructions to the deacon or to any extraordinary minister regarding the mode of acting in concrete situations. Bearing in mind the nature of the above-cited norm, no ecclesiastical authority may dispense the minister of Holy Communion from this obligation in any case, nor may he emanate directives that contradict it.

Pope St. John Paul affirmed the force of the canon and the pontifical council's interpretation in his 2003 encyclical on the Holy Eucharist.<sup>21</sup>

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## RELATED FAITH FACTS

Promoting Adoration of the Most Holy Eucharist  
Holy Communion for Catholics Suffering From Celiac Sprue, Alcoholism & Other Diseases  
Intinction  
Christ's Presence in the Mass  
Reception of Holy Communion  
Spiritual Communion

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<sup>21</sup> Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist in Its Relationship to the Church, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 2003, no. 37, available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/index.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/index.htm): "The judgement of one's state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one's conscience. However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly and © 2018 Catholics United for the Faith, Inc.

steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the Church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved. The *Code of Canon Law* refers to this situation of a manifest lack of proper moral disposition when it states that those who 'obstinately persist in manifest grave sin' are not to be admitted to Eucharistic communion."