

How Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it.

The Communion Rite Part I



Office of
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Many of us who live and work in our high speed, high pressure world today will readily admit that one of the human activities which often suffers the most abuse is our need to take time out and eat together. On the one hand, we do not particularly like or prefer eating alone, but on the other, because we are involved in so many daily activities, we sometimes have to simply “eat and run.” Not good for digestion, obviously, or for the emotional peace of mind which meals taken together can provide. Unfortunately, however, our meals often turn out to be purely private affairs. We do not seem to have time for any other option.

Most faithful Catholics, of course, also take another meal, together each week. We call it the Eucharist, the Memorial Supper which the Lord Jesus took with his disciples on the night before he died. Without doubt, this was a communal meal, the Passover, which the Jews had celebrated for centuries and which we Christians continue to celebrate together in Christ’s memory.

The part of the Mass where we actually eat together is called the Communion Rite. The word itself conveys the idea of doing something together as one (cum-unio). Unfortunately, however, for reasons lost in history, many Catholics often think of Communion as their private moment with God. The fact that many others at Mass are also coming to the table of the Lord along with us, eating and drinking with us, seems less important.

So, let us take a look at this entire rite we call Communion. The Communion Rite begins with the Lord’s Prayer where we ask the Lord to “give us today our daily bread.” For Christians, this is preeminently the bread of the Eucharist. We also pray, of course, for bread for the world, a world in which millions go hungry each day (GIRM#81)

Preceding our journey to the table of the Lord, we greet one another with a sign of peace. (In the early Church it was called “A holy kiss.”) This is not a secular greeting (“Hi, how are you.”), not simply an opportunity to talk to those whom we might have missed on our way into church. It is not a duplication of the Gathering Rite. Indeed, it is not even our own peace we extend, for we do not have peace in our hearts. This is the peace which only Christ can offer us as a free gift.



This is not a time for private prayer. It is a time to express our unity in the Lord by joining our voices in sung prayer.

In their letter, “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and our Response”, the bishops of the United States wrote: “We encourage every Catholic to make the sign of peace at Mass an authentic sign of our reconciliation with God and with one another. This sign of peace is also a visible sign of our commitment to work for peace as a Christian community.”

Following the sign of peace, the Eucharistic bread is broken. It is called The Fraction Rite. We remember once again what the Lord Jesus did at the Last Supper: “He took the bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take this and eat it, all of you: this is my body which will be given up for you.”

Symbolically, this action of breaking speaks of our desire that even though we are many, we all seek to become one body in the Lord. While the priest is breaking the bread, the assembly sings a simple litany: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.”

After the priest’s invitation, “happy are those who are called to his supper,” the assembly approaches the Lord’s table. Ideally, at this time, we would sing a simple Communion refrain together which would speak of our “com-union,” our common union, of eating and drinking together. This is not a time for private prayer. It is a time to express our unity in the Lord by joining our voices in sung prayer.

Once we have returned to our places from the table, we are invited to continue standing and singing our common thanksgiving together. It is also a sign of hospitality and respect for our sisters and brothers who are still at the table receiving Eucharist.

After all have shared the Lord’s Supper, there should be generous time devoted to silence and personal prayer. The Communion Rite ends with the Prayer after Communion which the priest prays in the name of all of us.

Realistically, it may be true that “the world” will always impose on our daily meals. Having said that, however, if we try to celebrate our Sunday meal, the Lord’s Meal, together as he celebrated it with his disciples, even our meals at home may become moments we can look forward to with a sense of eagerness and joy.