

Reception of the Blood of Christ: Communion from the Cup

Some Background Information . . .

The normal practice in the early Church was that all present for the eucharistic celebration shared bread broken from one loaf and drank wine from the common cup: both the Body and Blood of the Lord. It was only under special circumstances that reception of the Eucharist was under one form, such as taking the consecrated bread home for the sick after the celebration.

The reception of communion under the forms of both bread and wine continued to be the practice through the High Middle Ages. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, communion from the cup was discouraged and finally not permitted except for the priest presiding at Mass. The difficulties entailed in the distribution of the cup and a concern about the possibility of spilling the precious blood are the main reasons for the restriction of the ancient practice of receiving under both forms.

The mid-sixteenth century Council of Trent declared that the faithful were not being deprived of any sacramental grace by this new restriction since Christ is present whole and entire under each of the two forms. Thus, by receiving under the form of bread alone, the faithful receive the entirety of Christ's presence. The Second Vatican Council called for the restoration of communion under both forms. This restoration of the cup to communicants is not meant to contradict the theological teaching of the Council of Trent, but fills it out by noting the importance of eating and drinking as effective signs of God's grace. The Church's teaching on this may be found in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, which says:

"Holy communion has a more complete form as a sign when it is received under both kinds. For in this manner of reception a fuller sign of the Eucharistic banquet shines forth. Moreover there is a clearer expression of that will by which the new and everlasting covenant is ratified in the blood of the Lord and of the relationship of the Eucharistic banquet to the eschatological banquet in the Father's kingdom." (#240)

In the early years after Vatican II, communion under both forms was permitted in only a few situations. Experience taught us that the fears that brought about the restriction of the cup could be prevented by careful distribution. Encouraged by this experience, the U.S. bishops asked for and received the Vatican's approval to give communion under both forms at all Masses except those celebrated in very large assemblies in stadiums or arenas.



Receiving communion under the forms of bread and wine . . .

We come forward to communion in the usual manner. We approach the communion minister reverently and come to a complete stop, so as to focus on what we are about to do. Showing the consecrated host, the minister says, "The Body of Christ." We bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, "Amen." The minister offers the sacrament to us, and we reverently receive the Body of Christ either in our hand or on our tongue. When receiving the sacrament in our hand, we place one hand, palm up, on top of the other hand. Ancient writers called this gesture *making a throne for Christ the King*. After receiving the sacrament in our hand, we take a short step to the side, stop for a brief moment and then reverently take the consecrated host using the hand which is under the hand holding the host, place it in our mouth and consume the host.

Likewise, if we choose to receive the Precious Blood from the cup, we approach the cup and after the minister has said "The Blood of

Christ,” we bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, “Amen.” We then take the chalice into our hands, drink, and return the chalice to the minister.

The communion minister wipes the outside of the chalice with a purificator. This action is both a matter of courtesy and hygiene. It is also customary to move the chalice a quarter turn after each communicant for the same reason.

When communion is to be given from the cup, generally there should be two ministers of the consecrated wine for each minister of the consecrated bread. In this way, the Communion Rite will not be unduly prolonged.

Any consecrated wine remaining following distribution should be consumed by the communion ministers.

Answers to some common questions about communion under the form of consecrated wine . . .

Q: What about germs and communicable diseases in receiving communion from the cup?

A: The Bishop’s Committee on the Liturgy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in consultation with the Center for Disease Control of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has reported that to their knowledge there have never been any specific episodes or outbreaks of any illness that have been associated with the use of a common communion cup.

Q: Recently I heard about a Protestant church service in which wine was distributed in individual cups. Can we do this in the Catholic Church?

A: No. As Catholics we believe that the common cup is a further sign of our unity in the Body and Blood of Christ and a fulfillment of the Lord’s command when he gave a single cup to his disciples and told them to “drink from it.”

Q: Sometimes at Mass, I have seen people dip the consecrated host into the precious blood. Is this an acceptable practice?

A: No. This is, in effect, giving communion to oneself. Self-communication is not permitted. It is also unsanitary, since the bacteria on a person’s hands and fingers can easily be transmitted to the consecrated wine in the cup. In addition, it increases the possi-

bility that the consecrated host might be dropped while walking to the cup or that the consecrated wine might drip from the host. This practice is not “intinction.” Intinction is a rarely utilized manner of administering communion in which a single minister offers the dipped consecrated host saying, “The Body and Blood of Christ” and places it on the tongue of the communicant.

Q: What if I have a cold, suffer from some other illness, or am a recovering alcoholic?

A: While communion under the form of both consecrated bread and wine is a fuller sign of the Body and Blood of Christ, a person should use his/her own good judgment about receiving communion from the cup in any of the situations mentioned above.

Q: What about children who have already receive First Communion, should they regularly receive communion under both forms?

A: Yes, they should. Children are creatures of habit. Introducing them at a young age to receiving communion under the form of both bread and wine will only help them to realize Jesus’ words to all: “*Take this all of you and eat . . . Take this all of you and drink . . . Do this in memory of me.*”

The Sign of Reverence

Q: What is the new “sign of reverence” for communion?

A: A 1967 Roman document permitted bishops of a country to determine practices related to the Eucharist. The document stated that it was appropriate that a communicant, when receiving communion standing, make a sign of reverence, to be determined according to local culture. The U.S. bishops have determined that a “bow of the head” will be the sign of reverence both before receiving the consecrated host and before drinking from the chalice.

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Liturgical Catechesis on the Eucharist

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