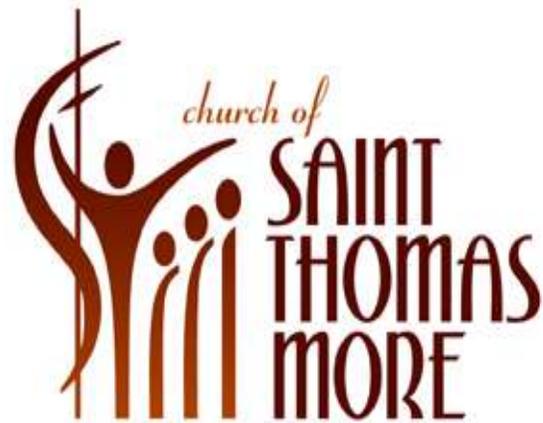


The Communion Rite

We're all familiar with the flow of the liturgy from the Eucharistic Prayer to the reception of Communion. But the ritual has not always existed in the same form.

In the earliest celebrations of the mass, the presider (in those days most often a Bishop) had no fixed formula of prayers to say between the "Amen" of the Eucharistic Prayer and the reception of communion. The great prayer of thanksgiving was followed by a simple breaking of the bread and sharing of the Body and Blood of the Lord.



A growing desire to express the community's mutual love and unity resulted in the expansion of the ritual leading up to the reception of the Eucharist. By the early fifth century, the Lord's Prayer and the sharing of the sign of peace had been added and were established parts of the rite. This grew from a desire to express unity with each other, praying the words of Jesus asking for forgiveness as we forgive others and making peace with each other before receiving communion, itself the sign of unity.

The problem was, not every church followed the same sequence.

This opened the door for the addition of other expressive ceremonies and prayers. Over the following centuries, the entire rite saw liturgical revisions which shifted around the various components, resulting in a complex ritual that was somewhat devoid of logic. The idea was to express unity, but each place did that differently!

The action of receiving communion remained simple, but by the Middle Ages, other ceremonies, prayers, chants and actions were added. The result was a fairly complex ritual. Interestingly, as the ritual surrounding communion grew more elaborate, the number of people receiving communion dropped. By the thirteenth century, communion of the faithful other than at the point of death, was almost unheard of.

The Church's response was to stress the need for frequent communion, with the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) threatening excommunication for someone who does not receive at least once a year. The Council of Trent expressed a wish that "at each Mass, the faithful who are present should communicate" (Session 22, 1562)

At the same time, there was also a renewed emphasis on the need for personal purity to receive the Body of Christ. Elaborate rites preparing for communion *outside* of mass developed, including formulas for confession and absolution.

Today, our ritual is much simpler, with the Lord's Prayer, the Sign of Peace and breaking of the bread (during the Lamb of God) preparing us for what the General Instruction calls "the Paschal Banquet" (GIRM 80).

The communion procession and its accompanying song are the highlights of the Communion Rite. The General Instruction urges us all to receive both the Body and Blood of Christ at mass, so that "*Communion will stand out more clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being*

celebrated.” (GIRM 85)

Although the revisions of the past century have not really reduced the number of ritual elements, they have at least been arranged in a more logical pattern.

Fortunately, the actual reception of communion remained quite simple. The verbal exchange that accompanies the sharing of the host and cup is a faith statement, a basic tenet of our Catholic belief, which calls for a response from those who receive. The faith statement: “The Body of Christ” challenges us to say “Amen”; to say that we wholeheartedly agree with all that statement entails: that the host presented *is* the Body of Christ, and that we together *are* the body of Christ. Likewise, when we hear “The Blood of Christ” and are presented with the cup, we respond “Amen” to say we agree to accept all that the cup stands for: the sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

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