

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF EASTERN MONTANA DIOCESE OF GREAT FALLS-BILLINGS

How we Catholics Worship: What we do and why we do it. The Communion Rite #15

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 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." When we do eat together, there are certain customs and traditions regarding meals that have been handed down to us in our families that we simply take for granted: the kids need to be reminded to wash their hands, we do not begin to eat until everyone is seated, we make sure everyone is served in order, we do not leave the table unless excused. All these rituals, help us to remain civil, respectful and charitable.

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. 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).

Here, too, there are certain important things we do as we approach the sacred meal we call Holy Communion. First, out of respect for the sacred food and drink we are about to receive, we fast one hour from solid food. Second, we understand that we need to be in union with Christ and his Church if we wish to receive Holy Eucharist. If we are conscious of serious sin, therefore, the appropriate thing to do is to seek out the sacrament of Reconciliation. This is important because, if we are alienated from Christ's Body, we need to first come back into union with one another. We would feel the need to do the same at home if we had a "falling out" with members of our family.

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. This is the peace which only Christ can offer us as a free gift.

In their letter, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and our Response", the United States Bishops 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 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 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. Interestingly, because of the physical configuration of our churches and the number of people who are gathered there, we are actually not at the table; we are at our seats for most of the Mass. Therefore, when invited to the table, we move forward together with our sisters and brothers and, indeed, with the whole Church throughout the world. What is also important to realize is that the Communion procession is not simply a convenient way to get to the table. All processions are sacred movements, but this procession holds first place because we are approaching the place where we are spiritually nourished.

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 personal prayer. It is a time to express our unity in the Lord by joining our voices in sung prayer. Some may feel that singing at this time is an intrusion on their own prayer. In fact, however, the Communion song helps us realize that we

are doing all this, not as private individuals, but as a community, members of Christ’s body. Of all the times we should realize this, coming to Communion would be the time and occasion.

Once we have returned to our places from the table, we are invited to kneel or sit and to continue singing our communion song together. 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 Collect, The Prayer after Communion, which the priest prays in the name of us all.

If it is true that our ordinary daily traditions and customs have a way of forming us into groups and families, then surely these Catholic rubrics for receiving Holy Communion can also be trusted to bond us into that special family we joined at our baptism.