

6. THE EUCHARIST

Those who are not baptised Catholics are ordinarily not admitted to Holy Communion. Why is this so?

Difference of belief

Whereas a Protestant may be inclined to ask, “Where am I with God?” a Catholic would be more inclined to ask, “Where are we with God?” With Catholics, there is a great sense of the community of the church and less of an individualistic working out of one’s faith.

Communion – from the Latin *cum* (with) *unio* (union) – expresses for Catholics the unity of the Church. Participating in the Eucharist or Holy Communion means that they are in union with God and with the Church.

In terms of belief about the Eucharist, Protestants are not “in union” with the Catholic Church. The different churches have different understandings of the Eucharist. The Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches teach the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist. This means that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus is not merely present symbolically, metaphorically, or spiritually.



Transubstantiation

To explain the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Catholic theologians – using the language and thought of classical philosophy – speak of “transubstantiation”. Transubstantiation means that the substance of the bread and wine changes – in a real and fundamental way – into the substance of the Body and Blood of Jesus, while the “accidents” – or appearances – of bread and wine remain. The accidents are those things that can be observed with the senses, such as shape, colour, taste and texture, but are not the “substance” itself, which is distinct from these appearances and imperceptible to the senses.



According to this doctrine, the change of substance is complete. The Body and Blood of Christ are not contained in the bread and wine, nor do they exist side by side with the bread and wine. This transubstantiation takes place when, during the Mass, the priest holds up the bread and wine and says the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper: “This is my body” and “This is



What do different Christian traditions believe about Holy Communion?

Anglicans, Lutherans and Methodists profess belief in the Real Presence, but offer explanations other than transubstantiation. Rather than trying to examine the finer points of how exactly Jesus is present in the elements, they regard Holy Communion as a sacred mystery. We cannot define what is a mystery in too much detail.

Anglicans generally believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but the specifics of that

my blood.” By the power of Jesus’ words and the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ.

The belief that in the Eucharist the believer receives the Body and Blood of Christ appears to have been widespread from an early date. St Ignatius of Antioch, writing in about 106, defended this belief against the Gnostics, who considered Jesus to have been an immaterial spiritual being, and thus any “real presence” in the bread and wine of the Eucharist were illogical to them.

For Catholics, the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” It is a conduit of grace – the very life of God – for our souls. It is the greatest gift God could possibly give His Church, because it is the gift of God’s very Self.

Jesus’ words in John 6 are the scriptural source for belief in the real presence. Jesus declared, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51). Jesus was met with disbelief. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52) his hearers asked one another. Jesus then reiterated his message even more emphatically: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink” (John 6:53-55). At this point, many of Jesus’ disciples said, “This is a hard saying; who can accept it?” (John 6:60), and walked away. Catholics do not “walk away” from this teaching, but accept it!

belief allow for a broad range of understanding.

Lutherans speak of a presence “in, with and under the forms” of bread and wine; “in” because Christ’s flesh is in the wafer and His blood is in the cup; “with” because the bread and wine are not replaced; and “under” because the flesh and blood are masked beneath the external appearance of bread and wine. The bread and wine remain fully bread and fully wine while also being fully the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

Methodists speak of the *par excellence* presence as being a "Holy Mystery."

Reformed Protestants speak of a "spiritual" presence. Holy Communion is a "spiritual feeding." The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act done in remembrance of what Christ has done for us on the cross.

The **Evangelical** tradition rejects the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. They would have a problem genuflecting before what they believe is mere bread.

The more painful the experience of the divisions in the Church which breaks the common participation in the table of the Lord, the more urgent are our prayers to the Lord that the time of complete unity among all who believe in him may return.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #1398

While the finer points of the theological and doctrinal debates on this matter are beyond many people (especially children) who just see themselves as sincere and ordinary believers and thus feel slighted by their exclusion from communion in the Catholic Church, this difference of belief is nevertheless something that divides the Christian churches. For the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is a sign of the unity that exists in the Church, and sadly the Christian churches are not in unity on this matter at present.

Reserving the consecrated bread and wine

Differences of belief about the Eucharist are starkly demonstrated by what different Christian traditions do with the remaining bread and wine after people have received communion at a church service. In Protestant churches, if there is wine (or grape juice) remaining, it may simply be poured back into the bottles it came from. Churches which use communion wafers made of unleavened bread may keep the

“leftovers” in a drawer for use the next time. Churches which use ordinary bread may discard the leftover crumbs.

In the Catholic Church, the wine that is consecrated at a Mass, which for Catholics is the blood of Christ, is all consumed at the Mass, so that there is none left over which would then have to be kept. To return consecrated wine to a bottle which contains ordinary unconsecrated wine would be unthinkable and would signal complete ignorance of the Catholic belief about the Eucharist.

It would be absolutely unthinkable, in the Catholic Church, to discard consecrated bread, which for Catholics is the body of Christ. If there is consecrated bread remaining, it is kept in a vessel called a ciborium. The ciborium is placed in the tabernacle (the word *tabernacle* means “dwelling place of the Lord”, from Latin *tabernaculum* “tent”), a box-like cabinet often made of metal, usually with lockable doors. The tabernacle – considering what it houses – understandably occupies a prominent position in a Catholic Church. When Catholics enter or leave a Catholic Church, they genuflect (go down on one knee) before the tabernacle. Sadly, this practice is sometimes not observed, an indication that sometimes even Catholics are ignorant of their own church’s belief about the Eucharist, or do not adequately appreciate it. A red lamp, called the sanctuary lamp, is placed near the tabernacle. Its purpose is to indicate that the tabernacle is occupied. In some larger churches, the tabernacle may be housed in a separate side chapel.



Ciborium



Tabernacle



Sanctuary Lamp



Monstrance

Catholics often pray before the tabernacle. Sometimes a consecrated host is displayed in an ornamental stand called a monstrance (from Latin *monstrare* “to show”; compare the word *demonstrate*). The faithful pray and meditate before the host exposed in the monstrance. This is called adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. For Protestants, this would be idolatry, because it would be adoring a piece of bread, but for Catholics Jesus is really present (the “Real Presence”) and it is this mystery of God’s gift of himself to us that they contemplate when they pray before the Blessed Sacrament.

Some Catholic churches have *perpetual adoration* whereby members of a parish unite in taking hours of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament (either in the tabernacle or in a monstrance), both during the day and throughout the night, seven days a week. Parishes that have perpetual adoration report

spiritual benefits such as an increase in Mass attendance and reception of the sacraments, return of fallen-away Catholics, increase in religious and priestly vocations; renewal of Catholic family life; raising of the spiritual level of the people with a resulting desire and courage to spread the “good news” to others, and a greater community spirit, centered as it is on the heart of the parish, Jesus’ presence in the Blessed Sacrament.

Rules for Catholics

It may be helpful to understand that the Catholic Church also has rules for its own members about the reception of Holy Communion. Its own members must be mindful of the necessity of the proper disposition to receive Holy Communion. Those who receive communion must be *in communion with the Catholic Church*. There is an obligation to fast for one hour before receiving Communion. A person who is conscious of grave sin is expected to seek sacramental confession prior to receiving Holy Communion. Those who are divorced and have remarried may not receive Holy Communion.

Provisions for Eucharistic sharing

Eucharistic sharing at a Catholic Mass by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of the Church’s canon law. Like all church law these conditions are meant to be interpreted through the lens of charity. The Catholic Church’s norms require that Eucharistic sharing among Christians who do not share full communion with the Church is not done routinely or casually. While some priests do things “by the book”, there are priests who take a more pastorally sensitive approach to who may receive communion. If they are approached by someone who greatly desires to receive the sacrament, freely requests it, has a good motive and is not merely curious, and shares approximately the faith which the Catholic Church professes with regard to the sacrament, receiving communion for such a person may be consented to.

Receiving a blessing

It has become the practice in some places for those who are unable to receive Holy Communion to go forward to receive a blessing. If you are coming forward to receive a blessing, cross your hands over your chest to signify that you only want to receive a blessing.



FIRST HOLY COMMUNION

The Eucharist – the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus present under the appearance of bread and wine – is the source and summit of the Catholic faith.

First Holy Communion for Catholic children is a very significant event in their lives and an important festive occasion for Catholic families. It usually takes place at age seven or eight, after a year of preparation.

Traditions surrounding First Communion usually include large family gatherings and parties to celebrate the event. Girls often wear white dresses with a veil, sometimes passed down to them from sisters or mothers, or children simply wear their school uniforms. Gifts of a religious nature

are usually given. While First Communion is, of course, a cause for celebration, these traditions are temporal concerns which are peripheral to the lifelong spiritual union with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament that Catholics begin with their First Communion.



A fuller understanding of the Eucharist



While the Eucharist is a mystery, the full meaning of which is beyond our meagre comprehension, there is a danger that if our appreciation of the Eucharist begins and ends with discussion about the Real Presence we will never even begin to approach the full meaning of the Eucharist.

It matters greatly that we understand and know that the gathering at the Eucharistic table confirms and extends our communion with God and with all creation.

The Eucharist is a sacrament of Christian hope. It contains within it the memorial of Christ's Passover and the anticipation of his coming in glory. Vatican II's "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy", *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, says that we celebrate the Eucharist as "a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us" (par. 47).

A sign of God's coming reign

The Eucharist should increase the Christian community's sense of responsibility for the world. We cannot share the communion of divine life without reflecting upon what it means in a world without sufficient nourishment, a world in which injustice, poverty, and oppression are ever-present realities. Proclaiming the death of the Lord "until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to transforming the world in accordance with the Gospel. The Eucharist a sign of God's coming reign and of the promised transformation of all things.



Opinions



The Eucharist is Jesus' own body and blood. For someone to receive it who thinks they are only eating a piece of bread would not be right. The Eucharist is also a sign of unity in the Church. To share it with those who are not in unity with the Church would be dishonest. Communion in the Catholic Church means you are in union with the Church.

I suspect there is a lot of "ecumenism from below" on this issue, with individual Christians of various faiths making their own decisions about whether to receive Communion.



As a Protestant, my answer is: why would I want to? For me to understand the significance Catholics attach to the Eucharist and participate without sharing it would be to make a mockery of their belief. It's like saying "the most sacred part of your faith is so trivial that I can join you without agreeing with you." God forbid I should ever do such a thing. It is love and respect which should keep Protestants from taking Catholic communion. I don't share the Catholic view. But that doesn't give me the right to profane what they believe.

I am outspoken in recognising all Christians as a part of the body of Christ, so I feel the pain of the division between the churches. It is clear that not only am I not welcome to take the Eucharist in the Catholic Church, but the Catholics are being instructed not to take it in our church. I wonder if any Catholic feels the disappointment and ache I feel on this. My fear is that the disappointment the Catholics feel is that they think we should recognise them as the only true church.



I know a priest who has said publicly that any baptised Christian who can in good conscience join in the Eucharistic Prayer is welcome to come to communion. Of course in the Eucharistic Prayer you acknowledge the Catholic understanding of that sacrament, you acknowledge the role of the pope and the bishop, you pray for those who have passed on, et cetera, and I don't think many Evangelicals can sincerely and in good conscience pray all this.



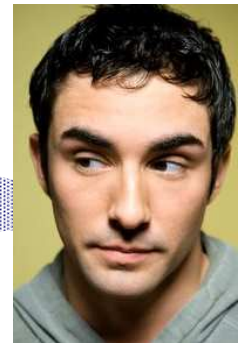
It would seem to me that in a Protestant church the eating of bread and grape juice is in fact not a sacrament and in no way are they even calling it the actual body and blood of Christ. So we clearly are not in agreement on this.

As far as the body and blood are concerned, it is not a matter of belief. The bread and wine either becomes Jesus Christ or they remain bread and wine. The state of the recipient does not reflect this miracle. Catholic teaching is that there no longer is bread and wine, only the appearances of each.



One should pause before taking communion in another denomination. One should agree to the beliefs of the church before taking communion. Thus a practising Roman Catholic, or a practising Methodist who believes that the whole thing is symbolic, would not want to take communion in a Lutheran church.

Those that consider the adage "What would Jesus do?" can't imagine him turning anyone away. The New Testament is filled with stories of how Jesus welcomed people from the margins of society, inviting them to the supper table and healing their ailments.



The times I attend a Catholic Mass, I stay in my bench and use the time while others are receiving communion to talk to God in my own manner.

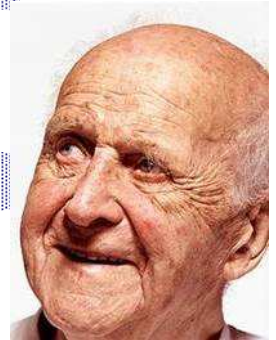
Well, there are a variety of practices out there. I am aware of some places that do welcome non-Catholic Christians to communion. But they certainly don't advertise this. And, yes, I know they are not following the official line in these cases.





I participated in Communion and now I have been told that it was improper for me to do so. Some of the Catholics were offended, apparently. But have I offended the Lord, I wonder. Jesus wasn't big on excluding people.

Most non-Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ and rather believe that the Eucharist is merely a memorial act of remembrance. To receive the Eucharist in the Catholic Church is to enter into a covenant every time we receive with Christ and profess, "Yes, Lord, I believe that this truly is your Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity." It makes no sense for someone who doesn't believe this to receive communion.



We have to remember what Paul said to the Corinthians that if they eat and drink the Body and Blood in an unworthy manner they eat and drink judgment upon themselves.

Cardinal Ratzinger, days from being Pope Benedict XVI, gave Communion to Brother Roger of Taizé, a Protestant, at Pope John Paul's funeral. So I don't see why I can't receive.



Many Catholics go up to receive communion with a very casual attitude. You wouldn't think they were receiving their Lord. Yet devoted non-Catholics can only get a blessing.

To stop a sincere person from receiving communion because of a law is very unloving. Charity and discretion are more important than canon law. Jesus healed people on the Sabbath and the disciples picked corn on the Sabbath because they were hungry, never mind what the law said.



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The Haven • St Vincent School for the Deaf • Jellicoe Avenue • Melrose
PO Box 2635 Saxonwold 2132 • Tel +27 (0) 11 447 9219/9211 • Fax +27 (0) 11 447 9129
E-mail info@cso.za.or