



Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “one body,” completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself. – Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *God is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, 14

The Church understands the Communion Procession (and every procession in liturgy) as a sign of the pilgrim Church, the body of those who believe in Christ, on their way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. All our lives we who believe in Christ are moving in time toward that moment when we will be taken by death from this world and enter into the joy of the Lord in the eternal Kingdom he has prepared for us.

The liturgical assembly of the baptized that comes together for the celebration of the Eucharist is a witness to and a manifestation of the pilgrim Church. When we move in procession, particularly the procession to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Communion, we are a sign, a symbol of that pilgrim Church “on the way.” For some, however, the experience of the Communion Procession is far more prosaic, analogous perhaps to standing in line at a supermarket or at the motor vehicle bureau. A perception such as this is a dreadfully inaccurate and impoverished understanding of what is a significant religious action.

The Communion Procession is an action of the Body of Christ. At Christ’s invitation, extended by the priest acting in Christ’s person: “Happy are those who are called to his supper,” the members of the community move forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ which is the sign and the

source of their unity. In fact, each time we move forward together to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, we join the countless ranks of all the baptized who have gone before us, our loved ones, the canonized and uncanonized saints down through the ages, who at their time in history formed a part of this mighty stream of believers.

This action by Christ’s body, the Church assembled for the Eucharist, is manifested and supported by the Communion Chant, an antiphon and psalm or hymn in praise of Christ sung by the united voices of those who believe in him and share his life. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* takes this piece very seriously, mandating that it should begin at the Communion of the priest and extend until the last person has received Communion.

For some, however, the singing of this hymn is perceived as an intrusion on their own prayer, their private thanksgiving after Communion. In fact, however, this hymn is prayer, the corporate thanksgiving prayer of the members of Christ’s Body, united with one another. Over and over again the prayers of the liturgy and the norms of the *General Instruction* emphasize this fundamental concept of the unity of the baptized, stressing that when we come together to participate in the Eucharistic celebration we come, not as individuals, but as united members of Christ’s body. In each of the Eucharistic Prayers, though the petition is worded in slightly different ways, God is asked to send his Holy Spirit to make us one body, one spirit in Christ; the *General Instruction* admonishes the faithful that “they should become **one body**, whether by hearing the word of God, or joining in prayers **and singing** ...”(GIRM, 96) it describes one of the purposes of the opening song of the Mass as to ... “intensify the unity of those who have been gathered” and says of the Communion Chant that “its function is to express outwardly the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, ... and to highlight the communitarian nature of the procession to receive Communion.”

It is difficult for some of us to embrace this emphasis on Mass as the action of a community rather than an individual act of my own faith and piety, but it is important that we make every effort to do so. Christ himself at the Last Supper pleaded with his Father: “Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us ... Father may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you ...” (John 17: 11; 21). Baptism has joined us to Christ and to one another as the vine and its branches. The life of Christ, the Holy Spirit, animates each of us individually, and all of us corporately and guides us together in our efforts to become one in Christ.

Finally, the fact that the Communion Procession is a profoundly religious action tells us something about the way in which we should participate in this procession. We are the Body of Christ, moving forward to receive the Christ who makes us one with himself and with one another. Our procession should move with dignity; our bearing should be that of those who know they have been redeemed by Christ and are coming to receive their God!

The Conference of Bishops in each country around the world determine the posture to be used for the reception of Communion and the act of reverence to be made by each person as he or she receives Communion in their territory. The Conference of Bishops of the United States has determined that in this country Communion will be received standing and that a bow will be the act of reverence made by those receiving. This should also be the practice in our diocese as well. The significance of unity in posture and gesture as a symbol of our unity as members of the one body of Christ should be the governing factor in our own actions.

Those who receive Communion may do so either in the hand or on the tongue, and the decision should be that of the individual receiving, not of the person distributing Communion. It is not appropriate to reach out with the fingers and take the host from the person distributing, unless one is prevented from receiving otherwise (due to infirmity, holding a small child, etc.). The person distributing Communion says audibly to each person approaching, “The Body of Christ.” This formula should not be altered, as it is a

proclamation which calls for a response of faith on the part of the one who receives. The communicant should audibly respond “Amen,” indicating by that response his or her belief that what has the appearance of bread and wine are in reality the body and blood of Christ the Lord.

When one receives from the chalice, the same proclamation is made by the person distributing Communion and the Communicant again responds “Amen.” It should be noted that it is never permissible for a person to dip the host he or she has received into the chalice. If, for some reason, the communicant is not able or willing to drink from the cup then that person should receive only under the form of bread.

Another sign of the dignity and reverence of the Communion Procession is found in the vessels used for the distribution of Communion. Ordinary cups and bowls will not suffice, nor will vessels that are made of materials that are easily breakable, such as glass or pottery. The sacred vessels, those that contain the Body and Blood of Christ, should be made from precious metals and be suitable for the noble purpose they serve. New vessels should be blessed using the rite found in the *Book of Blessings*.

It seems appropriate to conclude this reflection on the Communion Procession and the reception of Communion with a quotation from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

“In Baptism we have been called to form but one body. The Eucharist fulfills this call: ‘The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (1 Cor 10:16, 17):

If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond Amen (yes, it is true!) and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words, the Body of Christ and respond Amen. Be then a member of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true. (St. Augustine)” (CCC, 1396).