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## **“Happy Are Those Who Are Called to His Supper”: *On Preparing to Receive Christ Worthily in the Eucharist***

### INTRODUCTION

The celebration of the Mass is the center of the life of the Church. The heart of the Mass is the Eucharistic Prayer, for through this prayer Christ’s sacrifice is both recalled and made present and we give our thanks and praise to God. The consummation of the Mass, however, occurs in Holy Communion, where we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ.<sup>1</sup> At each Eucharistic liturgy, Jesus speaks his healing word to us and gives to us his life-giving Body and Blood—his very self. In so doing, Christ continually nourishes and forms his pilgrim Church as she journeys towards the Kingdom. In the Roman rite, immediately prior to receiving Holy Communion, the priest calls us to the joy of receiving the Lord, saying, “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” In the presence of such a great gift, we humbly respond echoing the words of the Roman centurion: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed” (Mt 8:8). Because of our own human sinfulness none of us is worthy of so great a gift. Yet Jesus comes to us in the Eucharist to give us a share in his divine life.

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<sup>1</sup> See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2002), no. 5.

As bishops and shepherds of the Catholic faithful in the United States of America,<sup>2</sup> we recognize our responsibility to nurture the faith of our Catholic brothers and sisters in this most wondrous mystery—Jesus’ Real Presence in Holy Communion.

In the following series of questions and answers, we wish to affirm clearly what the Church believes and teaches concerning the Eucharist and the reception of Holy Communion. We also wish to provide a clear affirmation as to who may receive Holy Communion within a Catholic Eucharistic celebration.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we want to recommend some practices that every Catholic can use for preparing to receive Holy Communion in a more worthy fashion.

## 1. WHAT DO WE BELIEVE ABOUT HOLY COMMUNION?

Holy Communion is a sharing in the Eucharist in which Christ is truly present. The priest, recalling the words and actions of Jesus at the Last Supper, consecrates the bread and wine, which are changed, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into the Body and Blood of Christ. This is why the Church has traditionally employed the word “transubstantiation” to describe the change that takes place. The substance (what something is) of bread and wine is totally changed into the substance of Christ’s Body and Blood. While the appearances of bread and wine remain, the

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<sup>2</sup> This resource has been developed specifically for Catholics within the Latin Church. With appropriate adaptations to particular ritual traditions, pastoral practices, and the requirements of the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, Latin-English Edition* (CCEO) (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 2001), however, it may also prove useful for all Catholic churches *sui iuris* within the United States.

<sup>3</sup> This document is directed to the Catholic faithful in general. As such, it does not intend to provide specific guidelines on the interpretation and application of canon 915 of the *Code of Canon Law*, which states: “Those who have been excommunicated or interdicted after the imposition or declaration of the penalty and others obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to holy communion” (*Code of Canon Law, Latin-English Edition* [CIC] [Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1998]). See also CCEO, cc. 711 and 712.

Risen Lord Jesus is actually present, and so it is he who is actually received in Holy Communion—Body and Blood, soul and divinity.<sup>4</sup>

We call our reception of Christ in the Eucharist “Holy Communion,” for through our reception of his Body and Blood we come into communion with him who is All-Holy. The Son of God came to share in our lowly humanity that we might come to share in his holy divinity. When we receive Christ in Holy Communion, we are united to the Risen Christ and come to share in his divine life. Thus, through Christ’s indwelling, we are likewise united, in the Holy Spirit, to God the Father, the source of all holiness.

## 2. WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEING UNITED TO CHRIST IN HOLY COMMUNION?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that “the principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus.”<sup>5</sup> This union encompasses at least three significant elements.

### **A. Participating in the One Sacrifice of Christ**

Jesus, our Great High Priest, lovingly offered his own life on the cross as a holy sacrifice to the Father for our sins. As the spotless “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), Jesus established the everlasting covenant—“the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20)—with the Father. In the Eucharist, this one sacrifice of Christ is again made fully present.

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<sup>4</sup> “Since Christ is fully present under each form of the Eucharist (that is, both the consecrated Bread and Wine), it is sufficient to receive him under the species (form) of bread or wine alone. However, the ‘sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1390)” (USCCB, *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006], 222).

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–USCCB, 2000), no. 1391.

By taking part in the liturgy of the Eucharist, we join ourselves to this one holy sacrifice of Christ. The celebration of the Eucharist culminates in the reception of Holy Communion. As Pope John Paul II has stated: “The saving efficacy of the sacrifice is fully realized when the Lord’s body and blood are received in communion.”<sup>6</sup>

We are nourished in the Eucharistic banquet by the living bread, and we partake of the cup of our salvation. The Risen Lord Jesus comes to dwell personally within us, and so we share in his life and friendship. He gives himself completely and entirely to us, and we are called to give ourselves completely and entirely to him. We are also lifted up into his heavenly Kingdom, and, in union with him, we are embraced by the Father in the love of the Holy Spirit as his redeemed sons and daughters. Receiving Jesus in Holy Communion, therefore, fortifies us against sin, which damages our relationship with God; heals us of our weaknesses; and empowers us to live holy lives of sacrificial love for one another.

## **B. Communion with One Another**

The reception of Holy Communion is an act of the Church as the Body of Christ. While we each personally receive Holy Communion, it is not a private devotion. Rather, the reception of Holy Communion is an integral part of our worship as a community of faith. Likewise, the term “communion” accentuates the fact that, in receiving Holy Communion, we are united to Jesus and thus to one another. As we become one body with Christ in receiving Holy Communion, so we are also united with one another. “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor 10:17). As Pope Benedict XVI has explained:

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<sup>6</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On the Eucharist (Ecclesia de Eucharistia)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003), no. 16.

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 who 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.<sup>7</sup>

Receiving Jesus in Holy Communion is then the foremost source and expression of our communion with the Blessed Trinity and with one another. Holy Communion is truly a foretaste of heaven—where together all of the Father’s children will become fully one with his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in the love of the Spirit.

While the celebration of the Eucharist gives us a foretaste of that perfect unity for which we hope, this foretaste should itself inspire us to work for a deeper realization of communion among all men and women here on this earth. Since entering into the communion of the Eucharist brings us into closer conformity to Christ, we should be filled with a truly Christ-like love for our neighbor that takes us beyond a narrow concern for ourselves and moves us to promote the common good and to uphold the human dignity of every human person. Pope John Paul II described this attitude to the human family as one of “solidarity,” which he defined as “*a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.*”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2006), no. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On Social Concern (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1987), no. 38.

### **C. Sharing in Jesus' Resurrection and Divinity**

In Holy Communion, we receive the risen and glorified Jesus, who once died upon the cross for us. Thus, we are nourished, here and now, on Jesus' own risen life and so become a new creation in him (see 2 Cor 5:17). Holy Communion, then, anticipates and is a pledge of our own bodily resurrection, when we will share fully in the heavenly banquet of everlasting life. As Jesus stated: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. . . . [For] whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him" (Jn 6:54, 56). Similarly, we "come to share in the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4), for Jesus, in Holy Communion, joins us to the Father by conforming us to his own divine likeness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Because the reception of Holy Communion is able to have such a profound effect upon those who receive it worthily, the Catholic Church encourages all of the faithful to partake of it frequently. "It is clear that the frequent or daily reception of the Blessed Eucharist increases union with Christ, nourishes the spiritual life more abundantly, strengthens the soul in virtue, and gives the communicant a stronger pledge of eternal happiness."<sup>9</sup>

### **3. WHO MAY RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION?**

Through Baptism and our shared faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we become members of the visible Church, under the apostolic authority of the pope and bishops. The celebration of the Eucharist expresses and enacts this communion in Christ. With few exceptions,<sup>10</sup> only those who are members of the Catholic Church may receive Holy Communion at a Catholic Eucharistic

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<sup>9</sup> Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery (Eucharisticum Mysterium)*, no. 37, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, new revised edition, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996). All subsequent Vatican II passages come from the Flannery edition. See also CCC, nos. 1388-1389.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A.

liturgy. Being baptized and sharing in the Church’s faith are, therefore, conditions for full participation in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, which culminates in the reception of Holy Communion.<sup>11</sup>

The Acts of the Apostles tells us that the first Christians “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). By its very nature the Eucharist is the fulfillment to which our shared life in union with Christ tends—it fortifies our common faith, nurtures the communal bond of love, and increases our holiness within the one body of Christ. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “The Eucharist is ‘the source and summit of the Christian life.’”<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. SHOULD WE EVER REFRAIN FROM RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION?

In virtue of our membership in the Catholic Church we are ordinarily free to receive Holy Communion.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is most desirable that we receive the Lord’s Body and Blood, so that Holy Communion stands out clearly as a participation in the sacrifice actually being celebrated. Indeed, we should all cherish the grace given to us in the Eucharist. We should strive to receive Holy Communion regularly, gratefully, and worthily. We may find ourselves in situations, however, where an examination of our conscience before God reveals to us that we should refrain from partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ. Moreover, we should be cautious when making judgments about whether or not someone else should receive Holy Communion.

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<sup>11</sup> See CIC, c. 844 §1; CCEO, c. 671 §1.

<sup>12</sup> CCC, no. 1324; see Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, no. 11.

<sup>13</sup> CIC, c. 912: “Any baptized person not prohibited by law can and must be admitted to holy communion.” See also cc. 213 and 843. See CCEO, cc. 16 and 381 §2.

## Lack of Sanctifying Grace

In order to receive Holy Communion we must be in communion with God and with the Church. Mortal sin constitutes a rejection of communion with God and destroys the life of grace within us. Mortal sin is an act violating God's law that involves grave matter and that is performed with both full knowledge and complete consent of the will. If we are no longer in the state of grace because of mortal sin, we are seriously obliged to refrain from receiving Holy Communion until we are reconciled with God and the Church. While we remain members of the body of Christ and continue to be part of the Catholic Church, we have become lifeless or dead members. We no longer share in the common bond of the divine life of the Holy Spirit. Because our sin has separated us from God and from our brothers and sisters in Christ, we have forfeited our right to receive Holy Communion, for the Eucharist, by its very nature, expresses and nurtures this life-giving unity that the sinner has now lost. St. Paul warned the Corinthians that "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27).<sup>14</sup> Manifesting the Father's mercy, Jesus instituted the Sacrament of Penance precisely to allow us to confess our sins in repentance, receive absolution from the priest, and so receive again the grace of the Holy Spirit, who once more makes us living members of Christ's body, the Church.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> St. John Chrysostom also relates St. Paul's words to our obligation to care for the poor with whom we receive Holy Communion: "Let's all listen to these words—especially those of us who approach the table in the company of the poor, but who afterward leave the liturgy and act like we've never seen them! . . . I beg you not to eat and drink in a way that deserves condemnation" (Homily 27, *On I Corinthians*, PG 61, pp. 229-32, in Nathan Mitchell, trans., *Assembly* 29:4 [July 2003]: 29).

<sup>15</sup> See Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On the Eucharist (Ecclesia de Eucharistia)*, no. 37: "The two sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance are very closely connected. Because the Eucharist makes present the redeeming sacrifice of the Cross, perpetuating it sacramentally, it naturally gives rise to a continuous need for conversion, for a personal response to the appeal made by Saint Paul to the Christians of Corinth: 'We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' (2 Cor 5:20). If a Christian's conscience is burdened by serious sin, then the path of penance through the sacrament of Reconciliation becomes necessary for full participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice."



Objectively, certain thoughts, actions, and omissions entail grave sinful matter. As Catholics, we are obliged to form our consciences regarding what constitutes grave matter in accordance with the Church's teaching. While it is not possible to make a complete list of thoughts and actions that involve grave matter, they would all be serious violations of the law of love of God and of neighbor. If we follow the order of the Ten Commandments, some examples of such thoughts and actions would be

- Believing in or honoring as divine anyone or anything other than the God of the Holy Scriptures
- Swearing a false oath while invoking God as a witness
- Failing to worship God by missing Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation without a serious reason, such as sickness or the absence of a priest<sup>16</sup>
- Acting in serious disobedience against proper authority; dishonoring one's parents by neglecting them in their need and infirmity
- Committing murder, including abortion and euthanasia; harboring deliberate hatred of others; sexual abuse of another, especially of a minor or vulnerable adult; physical or verbal abuse of others that causes grave physical or psychological harm
- Engaging in sexual activity outside the bonds of a valid marriage<sup>17</sup>
- Stealing in a gravely injurious way, such as robbery, burglary, serious fraud, or other immoral business practices

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<sup>16</sup> The *Code of Canon Law* obliges the faithful to participate in the Mass on each and every Sunday and holy day of obligation (see CIC, c. 1247). Provided that the particular law of their Church *sui iuris* permits it, Eastern Catholics may fulfill their obligation on these days by participating in the celebration of the divine praises (see CCEO, c. 881 §1).

<sup>17</sup> For different reasons, some Catholics find themselves in a marriage that is recognized according to civil law, but is not valid according to Church law. Each individual's subjective moral state may vary. Nonetheless, persons in this situation should seek to have their marriage rectified according to the law of the Church so that they may receive Holy Communion.

- Speaking maliciously or slandering people in a way that seriously undermines their good name
- Producing, marketing, or indulging in pornography
- Engaging in envy that leads one to wish grave harm to someone else

Catholics who are conscious of committing any mortal sin must receive the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion. Assistance in examining one's conscience is available from confessors and spiritual directors.

### **Lack of Adherence to Church Teaching**

As Catholics we believe what the Church authoritatively teaches on matters of faith and morals, for to hear the voice of the Church, on matters of faith and morals, is to hear the voice of Christ himself.<sup>18</sup> To give selective assent to the teachings of the Church not only deprives us of her life-giving message, but also seriously endangers our communion with her.

Some Catholics may not fully understand the Church's doctrinal and moral teaching on certain issues. They may have certain questions and even uncertainties. In these situations of honest doubt and confusion, they are welcome to partake of Holy Communion, as long as they

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<sup>18</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, no. 25: "Bishops who teach in communion with the Roman Pontiff are to be revered by all as witnesses of divine and Catholic truth; the faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops' decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. This loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra* in such wise, indeed, that his supreme teaching authority be acknowledged with respect, and that one sincerely adhere to decisions made by him, conformably with his manifest mind and intention, which is made known principally either by the character of the documents in question, or by the frequency with which a certain doctrine is proposed, or by the manner in which the doctrine is formulated." See CIC, cc. 750, 752-54; CCEO, cc. 598-600.

Referring to the authority of the pope and bishops as authentic teachers of the faith, the declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* states that the faithful are not simply to listen to them as experts in Catholic doctrine, but "must accept their teaching given in Christ's name, with an assent that is proportionate to the authority that they possess and that they mean to exercise" (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration in Defense of the Catholic Doctrine on the Church Against Certain Errors of the Present Day [Mysterium Ecclesiae]*, no. 2, in *The Pope Speaks* 18:2 [1973], 148).

are prayerfully and honestly striving to understand the truth of what the Church professes and are taking appropriate steps to resolve their confusion and doubt. Individuals who experience serious difficulties with or doubts about Church teaching should carefully study those Church teachings from authentic sources and seek advice from a confessor or pastor.

If a Catholic in his or her personal or professional life were knowingly and obstinately to reject the defined doctrines of the Church, or knowingly and obstinately to repudiate her definitive teaching on moral issues, however, he or she would seriously diminish his or her communion with the Church. Reception of Holy Communion in such a situation would not accord with the nature of the Eucharistic celebration, so that he or she should refrain.

### **Giving Public Scandal**

When a person is publicly known to have committed serious sin or to have rejected definitive Church teaching and is not yet reconciled with the Church, reception of Holy Communion by that person is likely to cause scandal for others. This is a further reason for refraining from receiving Holy Communion.<sup>19</sup>

To give scandal means more than to cause other people to be shocked or upset by what one does. Rather, one's action leads someone else to sin. "Scandal is an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil. The person who gives scandal becomes his neighbor's tempter."<sup>20</sup> To lead others into sin is indeed a very serious matter. "Anyone who uses the power at his disposal in such a way that it leads others to do wrong becomes guilty of scandal and responsible

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<sup>19</sup> See Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On the Eucharist (Ecclesia de Eucharistia)*, no. 37: "The judgment of one's state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one's conscience. However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the Church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved."

<sup>20</sup> CCC, no. 2284.

for the evil that he has directly or indirectly encouraged. ‘Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come!’ (Lk 17:1).”<sup>21</sup>

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Those who decide appropriately to refrain from receiving Holy Communion for whatever reason should, nonetheless, participate in the sacrifice of the Mass. In hearing the Word of God and responding to it through acclamations, singing, and prayerful silence they can allow that Word to work within them. At Communion time they can express in their hearts the desire to unite themselves to the Lord in the reception of his sacred Body and Blood. Moreover, they are encouraged to join themselves in heart and mind with Christ in Eucharistic adoration, such as Benediction.

## 5. HOW CAN WE PREPARE TO RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION MORE WORTHILY?

The Mass is not simply a private encounter between an individual and Jesus Christ. In a mystical manner, the whole Church is present in every celebration of the Mass, including the angels and the martyrs and saints of all ages. While the celebration of the Eucharist itself is a communal act, the benefit that each individual receives from the Eucharistic celebration depends on the way he or she approaches the sacrament. We would like to point out various ways in which each individual can better prepare himself or herself for Mass and can enter more deeply into the Eucharistic celebration, in order to receive the Body and Blood of Christ more worthily.

There are two interrelated ways in which we foster the worthy reception of Holy Communion. One is through “remote preparation,” and the other is through “proximate

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<sup>21</sup> CCC, no. 2287.

preparation.” The first has to do with how we live our Christian lives every day. The second has to do with how we come to and participate in the Eucharistic liturgy itself.<sup>22</sup>

*Remote preparation includes the following:*

- *Regular prayer and Scripture reading*

Both allow the Holy Spirit to work within us and so engender a love for Jesus and a desire to do the will of the Father in our lives. Especially recommended is the Liturgy of the Hours, which is the prayer of the Church with Christ and through Christ to the Father. All of these are particularly appropriate before the Blessed Sacrament.

- *Faithful and loving fulfillment of the duties and responsibilities of our state in life*

These responsibilities will differ insofar as one is a single person, a spouse, or a parent; a child, adolescent, or young adult; a grandparent; a bishop, priest, deacon, or one in consecrated life; a worker or retired person; one who is healthy or one who is infirm. It is by faithfully living out in our daily lives the call of the Gospel to love God and our neighbor—especially the poor and the vulnerable<sup>23</sup>—that we grow in charity, and so draw closer to Jesus and to one another.

- *Daily repentance of sin and regular participation in the Sacrament of Penance*

Sin undermines and weakens our communion not only with the Blessed Trinity but also with one another. Therefore, in order to overcome the damage caused by sin, we are called to daily repentance and to regular participation in the Sacrament of

Penance. Briefly examining our consciences and making an act of contrition, such as

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<sup>22</sup> For Eastern Catholics, the general rubric is stated in CCEO, c. 713 §2: “Concerning the preparation for participation in the Divine Eucharist through fast, prayers and other works, the Christian faithful are to observe faithfully the norms of the Church *sui iuris* in which they are ascribed.”

<sup>23</sup> The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifically notes that “the Eucharist commits us to the poor” (no. 1397).

before retiring at night, helps guide our repentance and fosters holiness of life.

Through these means, not only are the destructive forces of sin vanquished in our lives, but love is once more inflamed for God and for others. Communion is healed and strengthened.

Furthermore, if we are conscious of having committed a mortal sin, we are obliged to confess it in the Sacrament of Penance with true sorrow and a purpose of amendment before receiving Holy Communion. If a grave reason for approaching the Eucharist exists and the opportunity for confession is lacking, we are permitted to receive Holy Communion provided that we first make an act of perfect contrition and resolve to go to Confession as soon as possible thereafter.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that, while Confession is not required before receiving Holy Communion when one is not conscious of having committed a mortal sin, frequent Confession is strongly encouraged as an aid to growth in holiness. Moreover, the frequent reception of Holy Communion strengthens us against temptation and sin and helps us cultivate a life of virtue.

*Proximate* preparation includes the following:

- *Prayerful recollection*

We should prayerfully recollect ourselves prior to coming to Mass. We should strive to arrive on time, allowing ourselves to prepare our minds and hearts for the liturgy.

Upon entering the church, we should maintain reverent silence so that we and those

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<sup>24</sup> See CIC, c. 916. Cf. CCEO, c. 711. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called ‘perfect’ (contrition of charity). Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible” (no. 1452).

around us are able to pray before Mass begins. This will ensure that we are at peace within ourselves and with others. Such recollection helps to eliminate distractions and allows us to focus more easily on the great mystery of the Eucharistic celebration in which we are about to participate.<sup>25</sup> A prayerful and reflective reading of the Scripture selections for the Mass of the day will help make our hearts and minds ready to receive God's Word more deeply.

- *The Eucharistic fast*

We are required to keep the Eucharistic fast, that is, refraining from food and drink (except for water and medicines) for at least one hour prior to receiving Holy Communion.<sup>26</sup> This fast demonstrates reverence and respect for the Body and Blood of Christ that we are going to receive. It also teaches us to hunger for Jesus in Holy Communion.

- *Appropriate attire*

We should also come to the sacred liturgy appropriately dressed. As Christians we should dress in a modest manner, wearing clothes that reflect our reverence for God and that manifest our respect for the dignity of the liturgy and for one another.

Attentively participating in the liturgy consists of the following:

- *Active participation*

Because the celebration of the Eucharist is the source and summit of the entire Christian life, nothing is more important than participating in the Mass with our

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<sup>25</sup> Priests, especially, are to be mindful of their obligation to pray before the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice and to give thanks at its completion. See CIC, c. 909.

<sup>26</sup> See CIC, c. 919 §1. The elderly, infirm, and those who care for them are excused from the requirement of the Eucharistic fast. See CIC, c. 919 §3.

whole hearts and minds and bodies.<sup>27</sup> One with the priest and with all the Church, we join ourselves to the perfect sacrifice of Christ through prayer, song, silence, and action.

- *The penitential rite*

During the opening penitential rite of the Mass, we recognize our sinfulness and confess the mystery of God's love.<sup>28</sup> This disposes us to participate more worthily in the Eucharistic Mystery of Jesus' death and Resurrection.

- *Hearing the Word*

With active minds, we should listen attentively to the proclamation of the Scripture readings and to the homily. As when the Risen Jesus first explained the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus before he "broke bread" with them, our hearts must first burn at the hearing of the Word of Truth so as to receive Jesus more fervently in Holy Communion.

- *The Eucharistic Prayer*

We are to unite ourselves in mindful and heartfelt worship, adoration, praise, and petition with the priest as he prays the Eucharistic Prayer, for he is praying in the person of Christ the Head and on behalf of and in the name of the whole Church. That prayer is an offering of praise and thanksgiving for God's work of creation and salvation. It is a proclamation in which the Body and Blood of Christ are made present by the power of the Holy Spirit and in which we are joined to Christ in

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<sup>27</sup> See Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, no. 14.

<sup>28</sup> The penitential rite at Mass does not, however, substitute for the Sacrament of Penance.



offering sacrifice to God the Father. Our “Amen” at the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer confirms our “yes” to that prayer.

- *The Our Father*

“As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6). Through Christ’s atoning death and life-giving Resurrection, we have become adopted sons and daughters of the Father through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and so dare to pray to the Father in the words that Jesus taught us. In this prayer we ask God not only to help us in our need but also to purify us from sin, so that what is holy may be given to those who are holy.

- *The sign of peace*

Jesus himself exhorted us, “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23-24). This action expresses more than human solidarity and good will.

Exchanging the sign of peace prior to receiving Holy Communion highlights that it is as brothers and sisters in Christ that we receive Holy Communion. If we are truly to be made one in him through the Eucharist, we must first be at peace with one another.

- *Approaching the altar*

We are to approach the altar for Holy Communion with reverence, love, and awe as part of the Eucharistic procession of the faithful. This includes making a reverent bow of the head just before receiving Holy Communion, which expresses both our

individual and communal adoration of Jesus in the Eucharist as well as acknowledgment of our belief in the Real Presence of Christ in Holy Communion.

- *Love and thanksgiving*

During the period of reflective silence following the reception of Holy Communion, we are called to express our love and thanks to Jesus for his mercy and kindness, asking him to fill us with the life and love of the Holy Spirit so that we may truly give glory to the Father in our lives.

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The Eucharistic liturgy is “the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows.”<sup>29</sup> Putting these simple actions into practice will help us to enter more profoundly into the Eucharistic celebration, receive Holy Communion more worthily, and thus obtain more fully the grace of communion with the Risen Lord Jesus and with one another.

## CONCLUSION

Pope John Paul II exhorted all Catholics to contemplate the Eucharistic face of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Every time we receive Holy Communion, we have the opportunity to do this. In the Eucharist, Jesus brings to us his divine life, and we bring to him our lives of joy and suffering. In this communion with Christ we grow in faith, that our salvation is indeed near at hand; we grow in hope, that our heavenly risen life is already our possession; we grow in love, that in the love of the Spirit we are here and now bound to our loving Father and to our brothers and sisters in Christ. As bishops, in

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<sup>29</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, no. 10.

<sup>30</sup> See Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On the Eucharist (Ecclesia de Eucharistia)*, no. 7.

union with all of our priests and deacons, we rejoice with all the Catholic faithful as together we assemble around the altar of the Lord to receive Jesus in Holy Communion. May none of us ever violate or abuse this sacred mystery. May we always approach this holy mystery with due reverence and awe and love for the Holy One of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who is in our midst and who comes to abide within us, making us holy as he himself is holy.

## APPENDIX A

### MAY THOSE WHO ARE NOT CATHOLIC RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

Christians who are not Catholic are welcome to join us in prayer during the Eucharistic liturgy but normally are not permitted to receive Holy Communion, since they are not in full communion with the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, canon law does permit the reception of Holy Communion, under limited conditions, by non-Catholics who are baptized. Because of the very close communion that still exists between the Catholic Church and certain Churches that are not in full communion with her—such as the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church—properly disposed members of those Churches, who request it on their own, may be permitted to receive Holy Communion.<sup>31</sup> Other Christians may receive Holy Communion if they are in danger of death, or if they are in a situation of other grave necessity as determined by the diocesan bishop or the episcopal conference. In such instances Church authority must see that the following four conditions are also present:<sup>32</sup> (1) the person is not able to approach a minister of his or her own community; (2)

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<sup>31</sup> See CIC, c. 844 §3. Cf. CCEO, c. 671 §3. “In these particular cases also, due consideration should be given to the discipline of the Eastern Churches for their own faithful and any suggestion of proselytism should be avoided” (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, no. 125 [Washington, DC: USCCB, 1993]).

<sup>32</sup> See CIC, c. 844 §4. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has published additional “Guidelines for the Reception of Communion” by those who are not Catholics. These can be found at [www.usccb.org/liturgy/current/intercom.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/current/intercom.shtml). Cf. CCEO, c. 671 §4. In the Eastern Churches, the proper authorities for determining instances of grave necessity are the eparchial bishop and the council of hierarchs.

the individual has asked for the sacrament on his or her own; (3) the individual manifests Catholic faith in the Eucharist; and (4) the person is properly disposed.<sup>33</sup>

Members of non-Christian religions are also welcome to attend prayerfully the Eucharistic liturgy. They are not permitted, however, to receive Holy Communion, since they possess no bond of common faith in Jesus Christ—the one whom we receive in the Eucharist. This discipline is in accord with very early Church tradition: St. Justin Martyr wrote in the second century that of the food of the Eucharist “no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that the things we teach are true, and has received the washing for forgiveness of sins and for rebirth, and who lives as Christ handed down to us.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Because of the problems concerning Eucharistic sharing which may arise from the presence of non-Catholic witnesses and guests, a mixed marriage celebrated according to the Catholic form ordinarily takes place outside the Eucharistic liturgy. For a just cause, however, the diocesan bishop may permit the celebration of the Eucharist. These same conditions apply to non-Catholic spouses in marriages that are celebrated within a Catholic Eucharistic liturgy. See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, no. 159.

<sup>34</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, no. 66, in Edward Rochie Hardy, trans., *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 286.

## APPENDIX B

### MAY CATHOLICS RECEIVE HOLY COMMUNION IN OTHER CHRISTIAN CHURCHES AND ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES?

Catholics may participate in and receive Holy Communion during any Eucharistic liturgy celebrated by a Church in full communion with the Holy See, whether using the Roman rite or one of the Eastern rites.<sup>35</sup>

It may happen that a Catholic, for a legitimate and serious reason, finds himself or herself unable to attend a Catholic Mass. In such instances, provided that the danger of error or indifferentism is avoided, and that a true necessity or spiritual advantage exists, he or she may receive the Eucharist from a non-Catholic minister in whose Church the sacrament is valid, or from one who is validly ordained according to Catholic teaching. In practice this means the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Polish National Catholic Church.<sup>36</sup> Catholics should always be respectful, however, of the disciplines of other Churches concerning the sharing of Holy Communion, which may restrict the reception of Holy Communion to their own members.<sup>37</sup>

In many areas throughout the United States, it is not uncommon for Catholics to be invited to participate in opportunities for common worship with other Christians. Such opportunities can be “a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are a

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<sup>35</sup> See CIC, c. 923.

<sup>36</sup> See CIC, c. 844 §2; see also Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, no. 132; CCEO, c. 671 §2.

<sup>37</sup> See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, nos. 122 and 124.

genuine expression of the ties which still bind Catholics to these other Christians.”<sup>38</sup> When participating as guests in worship services in other Christian communities, Catholics are encouraged to join the community in the shared responses and in the singing of hymns.<sup>39</sup> It is not permitted for Catholics to receive communion in other Christian ecclesial communities.<sup>40</sup> Because the celebration of the Eucharist on the Lord’s Day is of essential importance to Catholics, moreover, if participation in a non-Catholic service were to occur on a Sunday, it is important for Catholics to remember that the obligation to participate in a Catholic Mass still remains.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, no. 108.

<sup>39</sup> See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, no. 118.

<sup>40</sup> See CIC, c. 844 §1; CCEO, c. 672 §1. See also Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *On the Eucharist (Ecclesia de Eucharistia)*, no. 30.

<sup>41</sup> See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism*, no. 115; and also, CIC, c. 1247; and CCEO, c. 881 §2.

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Msgr. David J. Malloy, STD  
General Secretary, USCCB

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