

Instructions on Receiving Holy Communion Properly

All Catholics, before receiving Communion, are to be free from serious sin and fast from all food and drink (except water and necessary medicine) for one hour before receiving (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1385; Code of Canon Law, canons 916 and 919).

According to the norm for the United States of America, the proper posture for receiving Communion is standing, “unless an individual member of the faithful wishes to receive Communion while kneeling” (GIRM, n. 160). The position of standing is meant to show the respect that is due the Most Blessed Sacrament (in our culture, standing up shows respect to someone of importance who enters the room); the bow before receiving Communion signifies the humility with which we must approach the Sacrament. The deeper meaning of this posture, though, is that the position of standing is symbolic of the Resurrection, and so – as is done in the Eastern Rites of the Church – we assume this position when we receive the Sacrament of our salvation. (The idea of kneeling to receive Communion goes beyond the ordinary respect we would show to another human being, expressing both reverence and humility toward the Blessed Sacrament.) At all times it should be remembered that the greatest respect we can show to the Blessed Sacrament is to ensure that whenever we receive Communion, we do so worthily.

When Receiving Communion on the Tongue:

Hold your hands in front of you in a gesture of prayer, and when you approach the minister of Communion, bow, and then say “Amen” after the minister says, “The Body of Christ.” After the minister places the Host into your mouth, return to your place in the pew (or approach the Communion station for the Blood of Christ, as the case may be).

When Receiving Communion in the Hand:

When you approach the minister of Communion, hold one hand on top of the other and extend your hands flat, like an altar top. (This follows the counsel of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who instructed the faithful: “make a throne of your hands in which to receive the King [in Holy Communion].” He also urged them to exercise great care for any fragments which might remain in one’s hand.) Bow, and then say “Amen” after the minister says, “The Body of Christ,” and places the host in your hand. Step to the side, reverently place the Host into your mouth with the other hand, taking the Host from the hand that it rests upon. Take care to consume any particles which may remain in your hand and return to your place in the pew (or approach the Communion station for the Blood of Christ, as the case may be). Note: if one of your hands is impeded such that you cannot receive Communion in this way, you should receive on the tongue.

When Receiving Communion from the Chalice:

Approach the minister of Communion, bow, and then say “Amen” after the minister says, “The Blood of Christ.” Take the cup with your hands and reverently place it to your lips to take a sip of the Blood of Christ. Carefully hand the cup back to the minister, and return to your place in the pew.

Why We Respond with “Amen”:

“Amen” is a Hebrew word which means, literally, “to be solid.” It is one of the three Hebrew words still retained in the Christian liturgy (“Alleluia” and “Hosanna” being the other two). The allusion here is to the image of God as a Rock, the sure and solid foundation upon which the believer stands. We find this image, for example, frequently in the Psalms, and it also calls to mind Jesus’ promise to Peter that he would be the Rock upon which he would build his Church, such that we can always be confident in the truth and in the sure path to salvation. While often translated as “I believe”, “so be it”, or simply “yes”, the meaning of “Amen” really conveys the meaning of staking one’s whole life on the sure foundation of God’s love and truth. Since no word in any other language can capture all of this depth and richness of meaning, the Church has always concluded its prayers with this Hebrew expression of affirmation of faith.