



# The Sacrifice of the Mass and Our Call to Mission



## Part 5

### Communion from the Table

*In previous reflections in this series we have considered how the preparation of the gifts, eucharistic prayer and the fraction rite set the Mass apart from other eucharistic worship like Word and Communion services. These are not only distinctive rituals, but they also embody a distinctive theology. It is the Eucharist and its rituals which in a very particular way lead the community to recognize and embrace our mission to the world born of Christ's sacrifice. We now turn to the practice of communion to consider how this liturgical action has the potential for leading us further into living out the self-sacrifice gift communicated in the Eucharist.*

#### The Call to Communion

Receiving communion is such a wondrous privilege that often the faithful give little attention to the source of that communion. In communion we are invited to experience the real presence of Christ under the elements of bread and wine. For Roman Catholics it became our tradition from the 9th century until recent times only to receive the bread, and it is that aspect of communion we will consider this reflection. In the next reflection we will consider drinking from the cup, a practice that has reemerged in the Roman Catholic community after Vatican II.

Because receiving communion is such an awesome event, throughout the history of the church the faithful have sometimes been hesitant to receive. In response, the Church often looked for ways to urge the faithful to communion. In the Middle Ages one Church council required that the faithful must go to communion at least one a year, a mandate still with us. During the early part of the 20th Century Pope Pius X lowered the age at which communion is first received to further encourage the faithful to receive communion regularly.

The renewed stress on receiving communion in the 20th century first developed within the context of the old Latin or Tridentine Mass. In that form, the ritual did not demand the full, conscious and active participation of the faithful that was mandated at Vatican II and is foundational for the reformed liturgy. It was common for the laity to be engaged in their own devotions or other activities, like praying the rosary, during the Mass. It also became common in some places for people to receive communion before, during and after Mass. In some places another common practice was distributing communion regularly outside of Mass. Even when people did receive communion at the regular time during Mass, very often such communion was not from bread consecrated at that Mass, but from the tabernacle.

## Differentiating Table from Tabernacle

These cumulative forces contributed to the emergence of a religious imagination among Roman Catholics that receiving communion was always the same, whether it was during Mass or outside of Mass. While communion is certainly always the presence of Christ, the context of that communion can mediate quite different meanings. Communion received as Viaticum in the context of the Anointing of the Sick, for example, reveals aspects of the mystery of Christ's presence that are different from those revealed in a Word and Communion service. The various symbols surrounding the rite of Communion impact the way we perceive and receive Christ's presence.

From this perspective, one can understand the importance that the ritual gives to receiving communion from the table rather than the tabernacle during Mass. The current Roman Missal notes that it is "most important" that the faithful receive communion from hosts consecrated at that Mass. One reason for this stress is the complex of symbols and meanings that flow from the table rather than from the tabernacle. For example, it is from the table, not the tabernacle, that the sacrificial imagery of the dying and rising of the Christ arises. It is over the table, not the tabernacle, that the Church invokes the Holy Spirit to change both elements and people into the body of Christ. And it is around the table, not the tabernacle, that the faithful are formed to become what they eat.

When we allow the tabernacle to displace the table as the sending point of communion, when the ritual place of our missioning is not the altar but the reserved sacrament, we symbolically distance the act of communion from all that the community has experienced at that table: from the thanksgiving, the saving remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection, the offering and the interceding. When we allow the tabernacle to displace the table as the sending point of communion, we blur the very distinction between the Mass and other rituals like Word and Communion services. When we allow the tabernacle to displace the table as the sending point of communion, we weaken the linkage between communion and the sacrifice of Christ which is so central to the celebration of the Eucharist. By consequence, we can often turn communion into a private act of reception, rather than a public act of missioning to become the body of Christ in the world.

## Conclusion

We receive the Body of Christ that we might become Christ's body in the world. Thus, St. Augustine made this famous statement to the baptized, "When you hear 'The body of Christ' you reply 'Amen.' Be a member of Christ's body, then, so that your Amen may ring true! Be what you see, receive what you are." One of the signs that our "Amen" rings true is our willingness to pour ourselves out in service to others just as Christ did. Christ's death on the Cross is the perfect expression of God's self-sacrificing spirit. Communion from the table is where that Sacrifice is remembered and celebrated; it is also communion from the table that more perfectly forms us in Christ's own spirit of self-giving. Let communion be shared from the table that this mission might more perfectly be ours.

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Author: Edward Foley, Capuchin

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web site: [www.fdlc.org](http://www.fdlc.org); email: [publications@fdlc.org](mailto:publications@fdlc.org); voice: 202-635-6990.

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