

Honoring the Communion Line

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Recently there has been discussion about receiving Holy Communion, what it means, when a person should not receive Communion or even not be given Communion.

To start we have to recognize what the Catholic Church means by the Eucharist and, therefore, the reception of Holy Communion.

In his last encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, Blessed John Paul II reminds us, “When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord’s death and resurrection, the central mystery of salvation becomes really present and the work of our redemption is carried out” (11).



The celebration of the Eucharist culminates in the reception of Holy Communion. The Church teaches us that “at the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ’s Body and Blood ... The signs of bread and wine become, in a way surpassing understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ” (CCC 1333).

When a person presents himself or herself for Communion, such an action is on the part of the recipient of Communion a public declaration, among other things, of the following:

- 1) The person is a baptized member of the Catholic Church;
- 2) the person accepts and tries to live the teaching of the Church in matters of faith and morals, and
- 3) the person has received sacramental absolution in confession if conscious of a serious failure in living out the teaching of the Church. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion” (CCC 1385).

Thus an enormous responsibility falls on the shoulders of the person coming forward to receive Communion. The Church is being asked to take this person at his or her word that all of the above conditions are, in fact, realized.

It would be disingenuous, not to say dishonest, for persons to claim to be Catholic and to wish to receive Holy Communion if in fact they did not accept or follow the Church’s teaching or, if having failed in the teaching, they did not receive absolution in confession.

For example, a person who violated the Fifth Commandment and had participated in an abortion, or had violated the Sixth Commandment and had sexual activity outside of marriage or was unfaithful to a spouse, or who violated the Seventh Commandment by continuing to embezzle

from the company for which he or she worked, or the Eighth Commandment by simply bearing public false witness against a neighbor, could not in good conscience get into the Communion line. Presence in the Communion line under such circumstances would simply be dishonest.

Getting in line to receive Holy Communion carries with it a grave responsibility before God. There are objective moral norms by which one's conscience must be formed. To conscientiously receive Communion, one must try to live those norms. Saint Paul tells us, "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).

On the part of the one distributing Holy Communion there should be the presumption of the integrity of the persons presenting themselves to receive the body and blood of the Lord. That trust can be presumed until it is proven to be misplaced.

However, there are instances when the one distributing Communion is to refuse Communion. The two most notable examples are if a person is excommunicated, that is publicly declared not to be a member of the Church, or if a person publicly attempts to use Communion for purposes other than its intended spiritual benefit – that is if one were to use it publicly for political purposes.

Thus, if a person had been publicly excommunicated as, for example, was the Louisiana politician Leander Perez years ago for publicly attempting through his political office to physically impede the Church in the exercise of its ministry when the Archdiocese of New Orleans began the desegregation of its schools, that person should not be given Communion. Excommunication is meant for a grave crime and is rarely declared by the Church. This penalty is not intended as a punishment, but as a remedy for serious sin. Public excommunication is imposed and removed only by those in the Church authorized to do so.

Another example would be for a person wearing a sign or symbol indicating rejection of Catholic teaching on some aspect of faith and morals to insist on receiving Communion as an act of religious defiance. Here Communion is being misused.

The reception of the Body and Blood of our Lord in Communion is an integral part of the celebration of the Eucharist and, as such, the communicant participates in the greatest of all of the actions of the Catholic Church – her Eucharist. It is out of her faith in the Lord and her love for him and the desire to celebrate the mystery of our redemption that the Church calls everyone to sincerity of heart as they approach the altar. At Mass we are reminded that what we are doing we do "in spirit and in truth." Everyone involved in distributing and receiving Communion is called to recognize the power of the Spirit present, a Spirit of love, and our obligation to walk in the truth – the revelation proclaimed by the Church.

The Communion line is that moment when we approach to have Christ join himself with us, "mingling his body and blood with ours, sharing his soul and divinity with our poor humanity" (His Eminence Donald Cardinal Wuerl, *The Mass: The Glory, the Mystery, the Tradition*). It is a time to be prepared. So if we are not prepared, we must wait and return when we can receive him most worthily. In the Communion line, the only statements to be made are Jesus' saving action for us and our "Amen."