VIII. Preparing to Receive Communion

This is the eighth in a series of eleven or so articles on the celebration of the Mass.
Article #9 is entitled, “The Body of Christ…” “Amen!”

The Greeting of Peace

The GIRM reminds us that the Sign of Peace is meant to be a prayerful gesture signifying that we are at peace with one another. It warns against the rite becoming prolonged, boisterous, or distracting. Finally, it indicates that the presider should always remain in the sanctuary, greeting only those ministers around him. (GIRM 154b)

The Breaking of the Bread, or the Fraction Rite

The Breaking of the Bread, the “Fraction,” follows the Sign of Peace. The early Church referred to Eucharist by “the breaking of the bread,” thus signifying the importance of this gesture. What might it mean? What does the GIRM say about it? Quoting 1 Corinthians 10:17, it says that the rite “signifies that the many faithful are made one body.”

There is one Bread and one Body. Even though the one Bread is broken, each portion still communicates the full presence of Christ to those who receive him in faith. We, the faithful, might reflect on our own experience of resisting “being broken.” “If I am broken, I will be so much less a person, with hardly anything left.” Yet, this rite can also reveal to us that that Love, though broken, is never diminished. The breaking of the bread is both a manifestation and a promise of our sharing in this love of Christ.

“The priest breaks the Eucharistic Bread, assisted, if the case calls for it, by the deacon or a concelebrant. Christ’s gesture of breaking bread at the Last Supper, which gave the entire Eucharistic Action its name in apostolic times, signifies that the many faithful are made one body (1 Cor 10:17) by receiving Communion from the one Bread of Life which is Christ, who died and rose for the salvation of the world. The fraction or breaking of bread is begun after the sign of peace and is carried out with proper reverence, though it should not be unnecessarily prolonged, nor should it be accorded undue importance. This rite is reserved to the priest and the deacon.” (GIRM 83)

The General Instruction reserves the breaking of the bread and pouring of the cup to the presider and deacon solely. Eucharistic minister can no longer be involved in the distribution of Eucharistic bread or wine into their appropriate containers.

The “Lamb of God” Invocation

“The supplication Agnus Dei, is, as a rule, sung by the choir or cantor with the congregation responding; or it is, at least, recited aloud. This invocation accompanies the fraction and, for this reason, may be repeated as many times as necessary until the rite has reached its conclusion…” (GIRM 83)

Pope Sergius I, a Syrian, introduced the Agnus Dei, the “Lamb of God,” into the liturgy, at the end of the 7th century. It is a repetitive litany described here as a supplication to the Lamb who has been offered up on our behalf. The sung Agnus Dei may be repeated often enough in order to accompany the entire rite of the Breaking of the Bread / Fraction.

The Communion Rite includes:
- The Lord’s Prayer
- the Sign of Peace
- the Breaking of the Bread (the Fraction Rite)
- Communion
- the Prayer After Communion

The Showing of the Eucharistic Bread and Wine

Note the dual focus of the announcement, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are we who are called to his supper.” The first part proclaims the Church’s faith that the consecrated Bread and Wine is the Body and Blood of Christ, now shown to the people under Jesus’ title, “Lamb of God.” Christ is the One who takes away our sins, our Redeemer. He is the One who welcomes sinners to the table.

The second focus underscores the eschatological reality of Communion. That is, we all share in the final banquet of the Lamb now, at this time – today. The faithful are invited to share now in the great and final banquet at the end of time! That banquet is here, but not in fullness. We share today in that future reality even as we manifest the promise of the Lord fulfilled in our Communion.

“Lord, I am not worthy…”

The community responds with a simple yet profound act of humility, using a form of the words used by the centurion whose daughter was soon to be healed by Jesus: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” (Matthew 8:8) Words like these, “Lord, I am not worthy,” originated in Italian monastic usage dating from the 11th century. It was not until the Council of Aix (1585) that the use of the whole phrase (above) was decreed to be used as a declaration of the faithful’s belief in the Real Presence to counter its denial in the Reformation. This custom was introduced into the order of Communion in the
Roman Ritual of 1614 in Latin; whereas the common practice before was to say it in the vernacular.

A Note: This is one of those points in the liturgy that functions as an “Ink Blot Test.” Some report confusion, having just heard (in Eucharistic Prayer II), “We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.” Others are put off by the phrase due to personal struggles with self-esteem. Still others find it a significant humble response of a sinner to Redeemer. Its Gospel context may help many of the faithful: we are all in need of healing and humbly invite the Lord’s presence into our lives.

The Rite of Communion – Some Remarks

The General Instruction pauses, as it were, to make several important remarks at this juncture that could easily be passed over. The first one concerns the desirability that the faithful receive the Eucharistic Bread from hosts consecrated at the liturgy they are attending. The GIRM considers it less than desirable to serve Communion to the faithful with hosts taken from the tabernacle. This offers a healthy challenge to most parishes in the U.S.

“While the priest is receiving the Sacrament, the Communion chant is begun. Its purpose is to express the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to highlight more clearly the “communitarian” nature of the procession to receive Communion. The singing is continued for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful.” (GIRM 85)

Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of the faithful receiving from the chalice for the sake of a more complete participation in the liturgy. This, too, challenges parishes that don’t offer the Cup often as well as the faithful who pass it by.

Brief Excursus – Receiving the Blood of Christ

Not a small number of the faithful avoid receiving the Blood of Christ when it is offered at liturgy. Most pass by the minister serving the Cup wanting to avoid germs that may linger in the consecrated wine. Some few who are alcoholics pass by in order to maintain their sobriety. Others just pass by.

What about this resistance to receiving the Blood of Christ? Let us look at the symbol of blood for a moment. Many of us are afraid of blood. Today, we are counseled to wear latex gloves when dealing with spilled blood because it may contain serious and life-threatening diseases – HIV/AIDS, STD’s, and other blood-borne pathogens harmful to human life. Blood, today, implies death more than it implies life.

We risk death when we receive the Blood of Christ. But, isn’t that what we say? We are incorporated into Christ’s paschal mystery – his outpouring love, shown in the blood he shed. Our contemporary fear of blood certainly speaks volumes when we also see it as related to our fear of pouring ourselves out for another. Perhaps this stronger invitation to receive the Blood of Christ will invite many of us to reflect on our resistance to doing just that.

The Communion Song

Next, the GIRM addresses the intent and ritual function of the Communion Song. Please observe the several purposes given for Communion music. Unity, joy, and the ‘communitarian’ nature of the procession are the key elements that singing at Communion is meant to foster:

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Again, the GIRM lodges another challenge to some contemporary practices that have shaped and formed the Rite of Communion into a solitary, individual experience of prayer.

Some More Early History of the Mass

By the 6th century, the practice of the faithful receiving Communion had fallen into such disuse, that tradition records Caesarius of Arles, (6th century bishop of Gaul) directing his flock to remain in church “until the Lord’s Prayer has been said and the people have received a blessing.” In other words, the liturgy ended after the Lord’s Prayer and Communion was distributed to the few after their dismissal.

What Comes Next…

In article #9, aspects of receiving Communion will be addressed. Finally, in article #10, more of the changes in the liturgy will be listed. A final article will speak to what sort of liturgy the GIRM seems to be calling for.

For discussion/reflection:

- What is your experience of sharing? What is your experience of ‘being broken’ for others? What new encounter with Christ is there for you by meditating on the breaking of the bread?
- What is your experience of the Lamb of God invocation? What did you learn from this article?
- What is your experience of the prayer, “Lord, I am not worthy?” What did you learn here?
- Do you tend to receive the Blood of Christ? Why or why not? What helps you? What hinders you?
- What does St. Augustine say to you about the “Body of Christ”?

The earliest liturgical documents demonstrate a rather simple liturgy overall. It is possible to recognize both Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist as its major components, but it has none of the preparatory rites for Communion looked at above. For example, the *First Apology* of Justin Martyr (ca. 150) states:

> And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. (Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ch. 67)