

# **Understanding the Catholic Faith: Receiving Holy Communion**

**Father James Chelich – 6 December 2019**

Dear People of Saint Thomas,

Recent events have raised questions about receiving Holy Communion. Some background and explanation seems to be in order.

From the very beginning of the Church there were people who were not baptized who attended Mass. They did not stay for the second part of the Mass, the Eucharist, and they did not receive Holy Communion. They were not yet fully “in communion” with the mind of Jesus, and had not yet decided to “enter communion” with the mind of Jesus. From the beginning of the Church there were Christians who were baptized and who “broke communion” with the mind of Jesus – they committed serious sin (among which were denying the faith, adultery, fornication, lying with the intent of defaming the reputation of another, murder and other acts of violence, etc). They did these things with knowledge that they were serious breaches with the Mind of Christ and the Will of God, and with clear intent of will. They chose their mind over Jesus’ mind, their will over God’s Will. They did not receive Holy Communion because they were not “in communion” with the mind of Jesus and the will of God. This has been the moral discipline of the Catholic Church for the last two thousand years. The principles of Catholic Faith behind this discipline are these:

- 1) You receive the Body and Blood to Christ to literally become a “member” of the living Body of Christ (i.e., a limb, a physical manifestation or extension of his presence. (See 1 Corinthians 12:27). This is how Christ chose to manifest himself physically in the world.
- 2) In Holy Communion you are joined by Christ to himself as a “member” of his Body,
- 3) You become a “member” of the Body of Christ to express in word and action the Mind of Christ in the world (see Luke 6:46).

If, by your choices and actions you are in willful violation, denial or dissent from the Mind of Christ, you disconnect yourself from his Body. You remove yourself from “communion” with him. When we say “All are welcome,” we mean, as we have always meant, that all are welcome among us to come to Jesus, to hear his call to repentance for sin and conversion of heart, and to learn to walk in “the Way, the Truth and the Life.” (John 14:6) Never in the history of the Church have Catholics who with willful intent violated the mind of Jesus and the Will of God been invited to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. They did not receive Holy Communion because with clear intent of will they were not “in communion” with Christ.

Sometimes a person’s serious sin and intentional breaking with the mind of Christ is a matter of public knowledge. This compounds the matter. By receiving Holy Communion they give witness to others that what they are doing is “OK to do.” This causes a lot of confusion about what is right and what is wrong in the minds of everyone, especially the young. Pastors are not to ignore this, but to admonish them privately first, asking them to return to the Mind of Christ and the Will of God. They are given direction not to receive Holy Communion until they have done so. This is not new. Jesus specifies such admonition (see Matthew 18:15-18) and the New Testament Letters indicate it was practiced in the Church from the beginning. For centuries many Catholics who engaged in serious sin and who could not yet bring themselves to a change of heart continued to attend Mass. They did so because the Word of God and the striving for

faithfulness of the community “speaks to their conscience” and draw them back. They do not avoid or shield themselves from this “call to conscience,” but freely choose it. When they refrain from receiving Holy Communion they give clear witness to the community and to the young that “what they have elected to do which is contrary to the Mind of Christ is “not OK.” They refrain from receiving Holy Communion because they are not “in communion” with Christ.

Why do Catholics have such a strong feelings about being in the state of grace before receiving Holy Communion? Because, from the beginning, the Catholic Faith has had a very clear understanding of what the Church is and what Holy Communion is. In the course of history some Christians separated themselves from the Catholic Faith and adopted very different understandings of what Church is and what Holy Communion is. The Catholic Faith has always understood the “Church” as something that Jesus creates, in person, in every Mass where he “members” us to himself in the reception of His Body and His Blood, which is his very life given to live within us. Catholicism has never understood “the Church” as a simply a fellowship of believers freely associating with one another. The Catholic Faith has always understood Holy Communion to be actually receiving the substance of the Body and Blood of Jesus, his real presence in the form of bread and wine, and that by receiving it with faith one becomes a living “member” his Body. Receiving Holy Communion has never been understood in the Catholic Church as a gesture of welcome, hospitality, or a sign of fellowship. It has always been an indication that a Catholic is “in communion” with the Mind of Christ and the Will of God. Practicing Catholics may not always be really good at living this out, but they strive for it with a sincere heart and with no reservations or self-declared moral exemptions. It is for these “strivers” after holiness – and that includes all of us – that Jesus is present for us in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That’s why Catholics wrestling with sin in their lives “go to Confession” before receiving Holy Communion. When Jesus says, “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do what I command you?” (Luke 6:46), Catholics believe Jesus really means it. When we pray the ‘Our Father” we really mean: “Thy will be done – not mine.” Catholic Faith is and always will be a Way of Holiness (Isaiah 35:8-9). It cuts and stretches us, and shapes a character of our soul fit for eternity. (Hebrews 4:12) With two thousand years of evidence given in the transformed lives of millions of men and women it is clear that it works.

Why is there such confusion about this today? The answer is really quite simple. After the Vatican Council II, for lots of reasons, instruction in the Catholic Faith for both adults joining the Church and for children and young people completely collapsed. It became astoundingly devoid of content. Priests also did very little instruction in their Sunday homilies. Children grew up without understanding the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, the obligation to worship at Mass each weekend, the Ten Commandments and their application, the sacrifice of self as the essence of love, Sin and Forgiveness, the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the importance of its regular reception, etc.. This went on for two generations. The actual content of the Catholic Faith never changed. What was lost in instruction became painfully clear when Pope John Paul II published the Catechism of the Catholic Faith. It then became painfully apparent that the content of the Faith had not been set out and taught. That has changed today in many parishes, but the confusion persists in the minds of many adults. Catholic Faith is just that: a faith. It has a substantive theological and moral content. This content is given and revealed by God. We don’t make it up for ourselves. We are free to submit to its Truth or not. When an adult becomes a Catholic they solemnly declare before the assembled congregation: “I believe and profess all that the Holy Catholic Church believes, teaches and professes to be revealed by God.” The riches of the Catholic Faith are there to be opened. That is the great task of our day.