

COMMUNION: HOW TO PREPARE?

The Catholic Church has often had a very rigorous side to it. There have been different manifestations of this rigor down through the twenty centuries since Jesus walked the face of this earth. One of the ways this rigor showed itself was in the area of fasting before Eucharist. You will recall that in the time of Jesus there was a charge levelled against him and his disciples. "The Pharisees and their followers fasted and John the Baptist and his disciples fasted. How come your disciples don't fast?" people asked Jesus. You'll remember his response. "How can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? But when the bridegroom is no longer here then they will fast."

And so fasting was part of the Catholic faith from its earliest days. When we go to the country Jordan every other year when we visit the Holy Land the Catholics there fast during Lent. But they fast from all meat for the whole of Lent. Every day. No meat. In the USA we are a little less rigorous. But there is plenty of self-discipline in our history. Some of you will remember what I am about to say. When I was a lad in the 1950's growing up Catholic, going to Holy Communion was an infrequent thing, sometimes a non-existent thing. Really.

The reason was that about a hundred years ago the Church, in the 1917 Code of Canon Law, established a period of fasting before receiving Holy Communion for both the priest and the people. Catholics were to fast from all forms of food and drink--water, liquids or food--from midnight until they received Holy Communion. Either food or drink after midnight but before your reception of communion would break your fast and thus prohibit you from receiving Holy Communion. So, for example, no sip of water after you scrubbed your teeth. You get the idea.

Practically speaking, if a Catholic went to an early Mass it was easier to observe the fast but once people began to go to Mass at 9AM or later almost no one received Holy Communion. This went on for years. There was even a rescript from 500 years ago to Catholics to receive the sacrament of Penance annually esp. if there was serious sin. And, to receive Eucharist at least once a year preferably during the Easter season. This was popularly called "Making one's Easter Duty." So, receiving Holy Communion was so infrequent that the Church had to pass a law that Catholics had to go at least once a year.

As a side note this Church law actually had the effect of prompting more Catholics to go to Mass and Communion on Christmas at midnight. You could go to confession on Christmas Eve. Go to Mass at midnight and as long as you didn't eat or drink anything after you got to church you observed the fast. And as an added bonus when you received Communion you also fulfilled your Easter Duty of once a year reception of the sacrament. Catholics love trifectas like that. Everything counts!

On March 25, 1957, when I was ten years old, Pope Pius XII issued what is called a Motu Proprio (Sacramentum Communionem) that allowed the fast time to start backwards from the actual time Holy Communion was received. It was shortened for all Catholics to a three hour fast from food and one hour for liquids and no fast from water or medicine. But in this Motu Proprio, the pope still highly recommended the fast law from midnight on of 1917. Practically speaking that change in the law of fasting had no effect on Catholic practice. Then on Nov. 21, 1964, when I was seventeen and already in the seminary, Pope Paul VI changed the Holy Communion Fast to only 1 hour from when you actually will receive Holy Communion. This is the rule as of today. Water does not break the fast, nor does taking medication.

I recount all of this because most Catholics don't know any of this. Also there was a time in the memory of those sixty or older of days when most Catholics did not receive Holy Communion at all. Let alone have ushers stand by your pew row after row. All of that is in the last thirty-five to forty years. But here is the point I would like to focus on today. If you don't really have to fast at all (one hour total from the time you actually receive Communion), what are you doing to prepare yourself to receive Holy Communion in a worthy fashion?

Is it ever the case when something has occurred and you need to get to confession before you receive Communion? Do you hold off or do you go? Do you even think about it? Does it cross your mind that there is a certain spiritual preparedness that we should work on in order to receive communion in as worthy a manner as possible? How do you tell your children to help them get ready? Ever read the passages from that Sunday's Mass beforehand with your family? Ask one of your kids to look on our website and print out the readings and read them or one of them before dinner on Saturday? Do you get where I am going with this? Spiritual preparedness has to be your responsibility.

What about your own spiritual preparation? How about a short mental inventory? Look back over the past week? Thank God for the blessings that came your way. Be grateful. Look for the times when you yourself were a blessing for your spouse or children or parents or friends. Thank God for the graces received. Also, note the bad things—the words, the deeds the selfishness that need forgiveness. Offer forgiveness spiritually to that family member or coworker that you need to apologize to.

Those are the kinds of things that deepen the experience of Eucharist. We don't come here to be entertained or to sit here with our mental motor running so we can leave at the earliest opportunity because we have something better to do. This is the home of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. If we do not eat this bread worthily—we will die. The Eucharist really isn't something we can take or leave with impunity or without consequences. It is Jesus, the Bread of Life who said at the end of his life: "No one can come to the Father except through me." There might seem to be a lot of other paths and doorways but if they are not in Christ they will all be dead ends no matter what WE think.