



Communion from the Chalice

Table habits formed at dining room and kitchen tables give us a sense of who we are as individuals, as family, and as community.

Ingrained within us at an early age, patterns of eating and drinking with others give us a feeling of security and confirm our sense of belonging. We know who we are as well as who we are not by what and how we eat and drink, by when and where and with whom we share our food and lift our glass.

Our ways of preparing, serving and sharing food and drink unite us with past and present communities of family (our menu for Thanksgiving dinner), of region (Philadelphia “cheese steaks” or Cincinnati chili) and of nationality (“seven fishes” for an Italian Christmas Eve dinner or Christmas tamales in the Southwest). It is not surprising, therefore, to find that most people are rather resistant to changes in their eating and drinking habits. Trying to convince Americans to put mayonnaise on their fried potatoes as the Belgians do is usually a futile effort. That may be acceptable on the other side of the Atlantic but here it seems very un-American.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have experienced more changes in *sacramental* table habits than in the previous thirteen centuries! Our fasting is less rigorous. We receive the Body of Christ more frequently, usually standing, sometimes from a lay minister, and with the option of receiving the host in our hands. We also have the option of receiving from a common cup the Blood of Christ.

Given what behavioral scientists tell us about a deep resistance to changing patterns of eating and drinking formed in early years, we should not be surprised to learn we are equally reluctant to change *sacramental* table habits. Despite the fact that communion under both forms has been the norm for eucharistic celebration in this country since 1978, many Catholics still do not receive communion from the cup when it is made available.

Why? What are our reservations? And can our hesitation become an opportunity to investigate anew the Mystery of Christ among us?

Some reservations regarding communion from the cup stem from a fear of disease and the possible spread of germs. Professional medical research on this topic has concluded that there is no known outbreak of disease directly related to this liturgical practice. Individuals with colds, of course, are encouraged to refrain from reception of the cup, and proper administration of the cup by the one offering it serves to eliminate the passing of germs.

Perhaps a deeper issue is reflected in the remark of one communicant who, in opposition to the practice of communion from the cup, said: "That was fine for the Last Supper where only a small group of good friends were gathered together." The implication in this honest statement is that the Sunday Eucharist is a gathering of strangers, and we do not share drinking vessels with strangers.

Perceiving ourselves as a gathering of strangers may be the biggest and most consistent obstacle to all Church renewal. At the same moment the gospel invites us to see one another with a new vision: we are, in fact, the family of God and never more so than when we assemble to hear the word, break the bread, and take up *this saving cup*. The Sunday celebration of the eucharist calls us to practice in our bodies then what we profess on our lips. By responding to the Lord's invitation to "take and drink" from the eucharistic cup we are challenged to turn from a vision of Church where we gather with strangers to a vision where we assemble with friends—not so much because we perceive one another to be friends but because each of us has been called friend by Christ whose Blood was shed to make us one.

Another obstacle to a more widespread acceptance of the eucharistic cup may well be a lack of appreciation for the full reality of Christ's sacramental presence under the form of wine. Our theology has always expressed our belief that Christ is as fully and truly present in the consecrated wine as in the consecrated bread but our liturgical practice has not always reflected that

theology. It is not simply a matter that Roman Catholic laypeople have received only the eucharistic bread for centuries. For all practical purposes they have only adored the Bread. Eucharistic devotional practice, e.g., adoration and benediction, has centered almost exclusively upon the reserved eucharistic bread. The centuries long absence of the consecrated wine in our eucharistic devotional life may have led to our less than full appreciation of the significance of taking up the cup of salvation. We are thus presented with an opportunity to regain that fuller sense of sacrament which occurs when communion is received under the two forms given to us by Jesus at the Last Supper. The Church in her introduction to the rites of the eucharist in the Roman Missal states clearly:



Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it takes place under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the eucharistic meal is more clearly evident and clearer expression is given to the divine will by which the new and eternal covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord, as also the connection between the eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of the Father. (GIRM #281).

As we strive to enter more fully into the eucharist, it is good to remember that the liturgical renewal of our Sunday assemblies is a journey. We never arrive until we come at last to that gathering of God's children where there will be no blinding of our vision to prevent us from seeing one another as brothers, sisters, friends. Until that final and lasting feast of the Lamb we are given the Bread of Life as strength for the journey. We are also given *this saving cup* that we might here have a taste of the banquet which is awaiting us in the Father's kingdom.

