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Celebrating the Communion Rite

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,  
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Master of Arts in Theology

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
Saint John's University  
Collegeville, Minnesota  
May 7, 2007

This Paper was written under the direction of

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Fr. Anthony Ruff

Jay Stimac  
has successfully demonstrated the use of  
FRENCH  
in this paper.

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Fr. Anthony Ruff

May 7, 2007

## Celebrating The Communion Rite

After our Prayer of Thanksgiving thunders to its climax with the singing of the Great Amen we are led to the altar-table to feast on the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. This ritual moment is the high point of the Eucharistic celebration. Our reception of the Body and Blood of Christ is both a profound statement of faith and a paradigm for how we are to live in the world as Christians. When we step forward to receive Holy Communion we declare our assent to be transformed into Christ's hands and feet for the life of the world. Unfortunately, far too often the presence of Christ in the gathered assembly is not reflected or honored in our liturgical praxis and, thus, a personal piety vaunted from centuries of solitary focus on the sacredness of the eucharistic species still haunts this point of the liturgy. In many parish communities the assembly sings the liturgy with gusto until the communion rite where their lips fall silent. Even more problematic, postures and gestures of members of the assembly often reflect a private "inward" piety that runs contrary to the communal/ecclesial nature of the sacramental action. Celebrated well, through robust communal song, gesture and symbol, the ritual unfolding of the communion rite can serve as proclamation of our unity in the Body of Christ and as a model for Christian living. This study will examine each element of the communion rite and will show how, through careful preparation and diligent catechesis, parish communities may celebrate well this ritual that is central to our faith.

This paper may be duplicated

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May 7, 2007

After our Prayer of Thanksgiving thunders to its climax with the singing of the Great Amen we are led to the altar-table to feast on the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. This ritual moment is the high point of the Eucharistic celebration.

Our reception of the Body and Blood of Christ is both a profound statement of faith and a paradigm for how we are to live in the world as Christians. When we step forward to receive Holy Communion we declare our assent to be transformed into Christ's hands and feet for the life of the world. Saint Augustine underscored the truth that we become what we eat in a sermon directed to catechumens when he pointed to the bread and wine on the altar and exclaimed;

“What do you see? Your eyes report “bread and cup” but your faith teaches “the bread is the body of Christ and the cup is blood of Christ” ,,,, How is bread this body? And how is this cup, or rather, the contents of the cup his blood? These things, brothers and sisters, are called sacraments because in them one thing is seen but another is realized. What is seen has physical appearance but what is realized bears spiritual fruit. If then, you want really to understand the body of Christ, hear the Apostle telling the faithful, you are the body of Christ and his members. If then, you are the body of Christ and his members, then it is your own mystery which is placed on the Lord's table. To that which you are, you respond, “Amen,” and so responding, you agree. For you hear, “The Body of Christ” and you reply “Amen.” Therefore, be a member of the body of Christ so that your “Amen” may be true..... Be what you see and receive what you are.”<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, far too often the presence of Christ in the gathered assembly is not reflected or honored in our liturgical praxis and, thus, a personal piety vaunted from centuries of solitary focus on the sacredness of the eucharistic species still haunts this point of the liturgy. In many parish communities the assembly sings the liturgy with gusto until the communion rite where their lips fall silent. Even more problematic, postures and gestures of members of the assembly often reflect a private “inward” piety

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, Sermon 272. PL 38, 1246-48, Translated by John K. Leonard. As found in: *Honoring the Real Presence in the Assembly, The Body of Christ and the Blood of Christ* by, John K. Leonard. Ministry & Liturgy; Volume 32, Number 2; March 2005, pg. 15.

that runs contrary to the communal/ecclesial nature of the sacramental action. Celebrated well, through robust communal song, gesture and symbol, the ritual unfolding of the communion rite can serve as proclamation of our unity in the Body of Christ and as a model for Christian living. This study will examine each element of the communion rite and will show how, through careful preparation and diligent catechesis, parish communities may celebrate well this ritual that is central to our faith.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

The Lord's Prayer, or "Our Father," is the first ritual element the community encounters after it has placed its punctuation mark on the eucharistic prayer with the singing the Great Amen. In this ancient prayer the Christian community petitions for daily bread and forgiveness of sin as it prepares to share in the sacred meal. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal lends support to this claim by stating that, "In the Lord's Prayer a petition is made for daily food, which for Christians means preeminently the Eucharistic bread, and also for purification from sin, so that what is holy may, in fact, be given to those who are holy."<sup>2</sup>

This prayer has, "been a part of the Mass since the late Fourth century and is attested in the West by Jerome (*adv. Pelag.* 3, 15), Ambrose (*De sacr.* 6, 14), Augustine (*Ep.* 149), and others, and in the East by Cyril of Jerusalem (*Cat. Mystag.* 5, 11-18)."<sup>3</sup> The Lord's Prayer is tripartite in structure; it is comprised of the main body of the prayer which is recited or sung by the gathered assembly, the priest-president's embolism which expands upon the final petition of the main part of the prayer that voices a concern for

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<sup>2</sup> United States Council of Catholic Bishops. *The General Instruction of the Roman Missal*. Washington, D.C.; USCCB Publishing, 2003, pg. 42 #81

<sup>3</sup> Emminghaus, Johannes H. *The Eucharist; Essence, Form, Celebration*. Collegeville, MN; The Liturgical Press, 1997, pg. 192

deliverance from the power of evil and a concluding doxology that is prayed by all present.

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal notes that the Lord's Prayer may be either sung or recited. Musically, the prayer fits the ritual music category of cantillation and should not be considered a liturgical song. Cantillation is a style of singing where the rhythmic and melodic movement depends on the proper delivery of words. In other words, *the text of the prayer takes precedence* and the melody should not dominate and take on a life of its own. All too often composers have fashioned settings of the Lord's Prayer that function as liturgical songs with elaborate melodic lines, harmonies and accompaniments that distract the assembly from the simple act of praying the text of the prayer. Besides being beyond the vocal capabilities of the average person in the pew, Albert Hay Mallote's setting of the Lord's Prayer is a prime illustration of how a dramatic melodic line can distract one from internalizing and authentically praying the text of a prayer in a liturgical setting. Musical forms that lend themselves well to cantillation are recitative and chant. A good example of a successful musical setting of the Lord's Prayer is the chant version that was adapted by Robert Snow. In addition to the laudable fact that the text drives the music, the Snow adaptation seems to be almost universally known throughout the United States, making for active participation within the assembly. Some scholars actually make a case that the Lord's Prayer should be recited rather than sung. While he is not necessarily against singing the Lord's Prayer, eminent theologian Joseph Gelineau, SJ writes that, "The Lord's Prayer is not one of the "sung parts of the Mass." It should remain what it is, the prayer that belongs to the whole

Christian assembly. Reciting it slowly, meditatively, quietly is a very good way of saying this prayer during Mass.<sup>4</sup>

Posture during the praying of the Lord's Prayer is not an issue that has been widely debated. Since the advent of the Second Vatican Council many communities throughout the United States have adopted the custom of holding hands during the recitation of the prayer. Presumably, this stance is to highlight the feelings of unity and "togetherness" of the gathered assembly. While these are noble and worthy goals these communities might do well to consider the more ancient *orans* posture where the arms, palms and eyes are slightly raised toward heaven. Johannes Emminghaus delineates some of the positive anthropological aspects of adopting this posture by writing;

"General anthropology has also shown us that among all peoples, the offering and showing of the open palms, which therefore cannot hold weapons or anything dangerous, is a sign of peaceful intent. Thus open hands uplifted are a universal human gesture of peace, confidence and petition."<sup>5</sup>

Given the reconciliatory nature of the Lord's Prayer text and the peaceful intent embodied by the *orans* gesture it then seems logical that the two would harmoniously fit together.

In his recent book, *Our Endangered Values*, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter lent credence to the peaceful thematic proclivities of this prayer when he wrote, "When we recite the Lord's Prayer and pray for God's kingdom to come on earth we are asking for an end to political and economic injustice. In fact, all major religious faiths are shaped by prophetic mandates to do justice, love mercy, protect and care for widows and

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<sup>4</sup> Gelineau, Joseph, SJ. *Liturgical Assembly, Liturgical Song*. Portland, Oregon; Pastoral Press, 2002, pg. 131

<sup>5</sup> Emminghaus, pg. 133

orphans, and exemplify God's compassion for the poor and victimized."<sup>6</sup> Thus, it seems natural that a posture signifying peace, trust and reconciliation should accompany the prayer that serves as a prelude to the Rite of Peace.

### **Rite of Peace**

Following the Lord's Prayer the priest or deacon invites the assembly to share a sign of peace. This rite, or sign, of peace is an opportunity for those gathered to ratify and express the bond they have developed together as Christians. It also serves as an immediate preparation for communion. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal characterizes this by stating that, "in the Rite of Peace the Church asks for peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family, and the faithful express to each other their ecclesial communion and mutual charity before communicating in the Sacrament."<sup>7</sup> The manner in which this ritual is expressed is rather open-ended; some shake hands, share a hug or kiss those near them. The Church prescribes no formula for sharing the sign of peace, but leaves it up to local conferences of bishops in accordance with the culture and customs of the peoples.

In the early church, the Rite of Peace was situated after the General Intercessions and before the Eucharistic Prayer. Presumably, its placement here was to highlight the biblical mandate to be reconciled with one another before sharing in the eucharistic meal. Matthew 5; 23-24 states, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." "Sometime before Innocent I (401-417) – we do not know exactly when

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<sup>6</sup> Carter, Jimmy. *Our Endangered Values*. New York; Simon & Schuster, 2005, pgs. 178 - 179

<sup>7</sup> GIRM #82

– Rome placed the kiss immediately after the Our Father, a position already known by St. Augustine (354-430) in Africa.”<sup>8</sup> This new placement seemed natural to some because it followed the final petition of the Lord’s Prayer that we be forgiven “as we forgive those who sin against us.”

One fairly common problem during the Rite of Peace is manifested when the priest and other ministers insist on sharing the peace greeting with everyone in the room. This practice holds both the ritual and the assembly captive and, even worse, “clericalizes” the moment. It is not uncommon in many communities for the assembly to have to wait for a significant amount of time while the priest-presider “makes the rounds” to greet as many people as possible. Liturgical theologian Aidan Kavanagh addressed this issue by writing, “there is no reason why the liturgical ministers must transmit it to everyone in the church. Christ’s peace is abroad among the faithful assembly itself. It is not mediated to all exclusively through the liturgical minister or the clergy.”<sup>9</sup> There is definitely a delicate balance between being hospitable and turning the ritual action into a social hour.

No music, instrumental, vocal, choral or otherwise, is warranted during the Rite of Peace. Using music here distracts from the purpose of the exchange of peace and gives too much weight to the ritual moment. The ensuing Fraction Rite, or breaking of the bread, is accompanied by a musical litany and that ritual element should not be overshadowed by music performed during the sign of peace. More importantly, music ministers should be engaged sharing the peace greeting with those near them at this time, not making music.

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<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Lawrence J. *The Mystery of Faith*. Washington D.C.; Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 2005, pg. 101

<sup>9</sup> Kavanagh, Aidan. *Elements of Rite*, Collegeville, MN; The Liturgical Press, 1990, pg. 66

### **The Breaking of the Bread**

The ritual action of breaking bread and pouring wine is a highly symbolic and meaningful gesture of unity for the Christian community. The *Didache*, an early church document from the second or third century explains the significance of this rite by stating, “As this broken bread, scattered over the mountains, was gathered together to be one, so may your Church be gathered together in the same manner from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.” The natural materials of wheat, water and grapes are a few of the fundamental symbols of our faith. Hence, great care should be taken so that the richness of the action may shine forth. Breaking substantial bread that has been baked by a member of the community adds a depth of richness and intimacy to the gesture that would not otherwise be present when using mass-produced hosts. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal reinforces this ideal in numbers 320-321 where it says that the meaning of the sign demands that the bread used for Eucharist *must* be recently baked and truly have the appearance of food. It also states that, “the action of the fraction or breaking of bread, which gave its name to the Eucharist in apostolic times, will bring out more clearly the force and importance of the sign of unity of all in the one bread, and the sign of charity by the fact that the one bread is distributed among the brothers and sisters.”<sup>10</sup> While the instruction does leave room for the use of small manufactured hosts, it seems abundantly clear that substantial freshly baked bread is the ideal toward which the Christian community should strive. Small mass-produced disks do not resemble freshly baked food and sorting them between patens most certainly does not reflect Christ’s body broken and shared for all.

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<sup>10</sup> GIRM #321

Likewise, “the wine for the Eucharistic celebration must be from the fruit of the grapevine (cf. Luke 22:18), natural, and unadulterated, that is, without admixture of extraneous substances.”<sup>11</sup> Use of a red wine, not a white wine, is always preferable to heighten the symbolism that this cup that we share is Christ’s blood shed for us all.

Sharing bread with the community that was consecrated at a previous Mass is unacceptable and *is an abuse that must end*. Feeding the community from the reserved Sacrament is problematic on many levels; it is inhospitable (like feeding guests “left-overs”) and more importantly, it deprives the faithful from participating in the sacrifice that is actually being celebrated.<sup>12</sup> Care should be taken to estimate precisely how much bread and wine is needed for each celebration. Communicating the faithful with hosts from the tabernacle should only be done as a last resort in the case of an emergency.

The Lamb of God, or *Agnus Dei*, accompanies the breaking of the bread and pouring of the wine. This litany consists of tropes sung by choir or cantor and a response sung by the assembly. The length of the Lamb of God litany varies according to how much bread needs to be broken and wine needs to be poured. The final response is always, “grant us peace.”

It is believed that Pope Sergius I (687-701) introduced the Lamb of God into the Roman liturgy. “Being Syrian, Sergius probably borrowed this chant from the Syrian liturgy.”<sup>13</sup> Scriptural references for the text of the litany come from John 1: 23, 36; 1 Corinthians 5: 7; John 19:36; and Revelation 5:6; 13:8.

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<sup>11</sup> GIRM #322

<sup>12</sup> See GIRM #85

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, 106

## Communion

After the bread is broken and the wine is poured, the priest and people prepare themselves to draw near the table of the Lord and receive the Eucharist. “The priest prepares himself, by a prayer, said quietly that he may fruitfully receive Christ’s body and blood. The faithful do the same, praying silently.”<sup>14</sup> It is important to note here that the prayer of the priest is *private* and should always be prayed inaudibly so as not to disrupt or denigrate the silent preparation of the community. After this silent preparation the presider states the invitation to communion, which may be adapted to the feast or occasion. “The invitation to communion has special significance. It expresses strongly the role of Jesus as host, and the hospitality that Christ offers to us in sharing this meal in the most intimate relationship with him. Sharing a meal is a sacred experience, the most reverent and special of human encounters. Jesus invites us to dine with him.”<sup>15</sup> And, “since all share in one and the same Eucharist, both priest and people respond, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed.”<sup>16</sup>

Following the invitation the presider receives communion and then administers the Sacrament to the communion ministers who will assist him with distribution. He and the communion ministers then go to their stations to offer the body and blood of Christ members of the community. Those who wish to receive come forward in procession. The assembly does much more than simply “line up” for this procession when it comes forward to receive communion. The communion procession is a corporate communal act that models what all liturgical processions represent – the pilgrim Church moving together with a common purpose toward everlasting glory in God’s kingdom. The

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<sup>14</sup> GIRM #84

<sup>15</sup> Haas, David. *Music & The Mass*. Chicago; Liturgy Training Publications, 1998, pgs. 100-101

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, 109

document *Liturgical Music Today* characterizes the communion procession in this way, “Not only does (the communion processional song) accompany a movement, and thus give order to the assembly, it also assists each communicant in the realization and achievement of the “joy of all” and the fellowship of those “who join their voices in a single song.”<sup>17</sup> When the communion procession is done well the sense that this is a private event falls away in favor of a more communal interpretation. If all of our senses are engaged the procession will succeed. If members of the assembly are singing and moving in concert with the music the procession will succeed. If members of the assembly are aware that the benefit of what they are about to receive is not only personal sustenance, but has a radical impact on the community and the greater world, then the procession will succeed. This moment is about the realization that we are on this Christian journey together, not alone.

What happens next is perhaps the most intimate moment of the entire liturgy. Each person steps forward to receive the body and blood of the Lord. Those who minister the sacrament need to do so with great care in order to unleash the profound power and meaning of this ritual action. It has been said that the eyes are windows to the soul and that eye contact is vital to effective communication. It stands to reason then, that ministers of communion need to make eye contact and be attentive to each individual who steps forward. The depth of the communion being shared is not limited by our symbols of bread and wine. Our communication with one another and care for one another at the Eucharistic feast is also sign and symbol of the presence of Christ. Since sacraments are vehicles for an encounter with the living God mediated through symbols,

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<sup>17</sup> *Liturgical Music Today* #18 as found in Elizabeth Hoffman, Ed. *The Liturgy Documents*. Chicago; Liturgy Training Publications, 1991, pg. 300

great care must be taken to ensure that the multi-valent symbols of the sacrament are apparent.

“When receiving in the hand, communicants should be guided by the words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, “When you approach, take care not to do so with your hand stretched out and your fingers open or apart, but rather place your left hand as a throne beneath your right, as befits one who is about to receive the King.”<sup>18</sup> The minister then, “shows the host to each person by raising it a little above the paten and says, “The Body of Christ.” The communicant responds, “Amen” and receives the bread of life. A similar formula “The Blood of Christ” precedes the reception from the chalice. As a sign of reverence the communicant bows his or her head before receiving the body and blood of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> The “Amen” of the communicant voices his or her belief in the presence of Christ in the sacrament about to be received, in his or her own being and in the community of faith. The normative posture for reception of communion in the United States is standing. Refusing communion to someone who kneels is inappropriate. Instead, care should be taken to pastorally address the issue and offer catechesis to individuals who choose to kneel.

Despite Jesus’ command to eat his flesh *and* drink his blood<sup>20</sup> communion from the cup became a rarity by the early fourteenth century. Many issues contributed to the decline in the reception of Eucharistic wine among the faithful: an emphasis on ocular communion (the faithful could not see the chalice, therefore they deemed it unimportant), increased piety and the fear of disease. In their wisdom, the framers of the Second

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<sup>18</sup> Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion Under Both Kinds #41, as found in Johnson, pg.114

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, pg. 110

<sup>20</sup> See John 6: 54-56

Vatican Council restored the ancient custom of Communion under both kinds. In fact, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal rather emphatically states that, “Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it is distributed under both kinds. For in this form the sign of the eucharistic banquet is more clearly evident and clear 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 relationship between the Eucharistic banquet and the eschatological banquet in the Father’s kingdom.”<sup>21</sup> Obviously, great strides have been forged in making the offering of the cup a normative part of our Eucharistic celebrations. Much catechesis still needs to be done though. Far too many parish communities throughout the United States deprive their parishioners the fullness of the Eucharistic sign by neglecting to offer the Blood of Christ at Mass. This is symptomatic of the disease of minimalism, which not only plagues the central symbols of the communion rite, but the entire liturgy.

### **Communion Song**

The communion chant or “song” begins while the priest is receiving the sacrament and continues until all present have received the Eucharist. “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.”<sup>22</sup> Joseph Gelineau reinforces the above stated purpose or function of the communion chant in his book *Chant et Musique dans le Culte Chretien* where he writes, “This chant is the oldest and most important processional of the Mass. It must accompany and solemnize the communion of the faithful. Even more today, the

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<sup>21</sup> GIRM #281

<sup>22</sup> GIRM #86, emphasis mine.

chant will express here the fraternal charity which unites the communicants and the paschal joy which fills them.”<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that the Church seems to presume that there will be singing during the communion procession not instrumental music or silence. Communal song draws those present into solidarity with one another and Christ. Instrumental music or silence, on the other hand, has an introspective character that promotes a kind of personal devotion and private meditation that is contrary to the very nature of the ritual action being celebrated.

The Church gives great latitude in the selection of the chant that accompanies the communion procession. There are four options for the communion song in the United States; the antiphon from the Roman Missal or the Psalm from the Roman Gradual, the seasonal antiphon and Psalm of the Simple Gradual, a song from another collection of psalms and antiphons or a suitable liturgical song.

Successful communion songs facilitate sung prayer and lead the assembly to the full, conscious and active liturgical participation that was envisioned by the Second Vatican Council. There are several characteristics that mark successful communion songs. “Antiphonal” songs comprised of a short memorable refrain for the assembly followed by verses sung by the cantor or choir seem to work best. Some composers have even begun interspersing acclamations for the assembly within the verses that are sung by the cantor or choir. Communion songs bearing this structure allow the assembly to join in the procession without the distraction of carrying hymnals or other worship aids. In addition, the call and response form models both the dialogical nature of the liturgy and

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<sup>23</sup> Gelineau, Joseph. *Chant et Musique dans le Culte Chrétien*. Paris; Éditions Fleurus, 1962, pg. 218. Translation mine. Text: *Ce chant et le plus ancien et le plus important des processionaux de la messe. Il doit accompagner et solenniser la communion des fidèles. Plus qu'ailleurs, le chant exprimera ici la charité fraternelle qui unit les communicants et la joie pascale qui les emplit.*

our responsibility as followers of Christ to live in communion with all of creation.

Strophic hymns do not generally lend themselves as well to use during the communion procession. Their use necessitates carrying hymnals and their texts are generally impossible to know by heart.

The texts of our communion songs need to be selected with care. Those charged with selecting music should be attentive to the appointed communion antiphons, scripture and seasonal sensibilities. Composer David Haas urges pastoral musicians to, “look for good eucharistic texts – not sentimental personal songs about “Jesus and me,” but songs that emphasize the communal nature of this moment, and focus on themes of banquet, meal, sharing and the “goodness of the Lord” (Psalm 34).”<sup>24</sup> The use of psalm texts at communion is an ancient practice that is highly recommended. Psalms 23 and 34 are especially popular communion texts. Psalm 23, verse 5, says, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” and Psalm 34 exhorts us to, “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” Other psalms that work well as communion texts include psalms 145, 43, 84, 104 and 116. “A literal exegesis of these texts would not find in them explicit allusions to the Eucharist. Yet the Christian insight that comes from praying the psalms recognized that the thanksgiving found in the psalms could be welcomed and used in the Eucharist, the summit of the Church’s thanksgiving.”<sup>25</sup>

Delaying the start of the communion song until priest and ministers have received communion is a common practice in many communities. This is a custom that needs to be re-evaluated. The documents of the Church presume that the singing starts while the priest-president is receiving communion and does not end until the last person has been

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<sup>24</sup> Haas, pg. 105

<sup>25</sup> Deiss, Lucien. *Visions of Liturgy and Music for a New Century*. Collegeville, MN; The Liturgical Press, 1996, pgs. 154-155

communicated (See GIRM #86). Beginning communion with silence rather than song is an open invitation for those present to view this moment as a time of personal rather than communal prayer. The song should begin right after the assembly responds to the invitation to communion with the words, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.” This means that music ministers must receive last. If they receive at the beginning of communion it is likely that the music will not have started until a good portion of the assembly has already received communion.

Following the distribution of communion the remaining bread and wine may be consumed and the vessels purified. “It is also permitted, especially if there are several vessels to be purified, to leave them suitably covered on a corporal, either at the altar or at the credence table, and to purify them immediately after Mass following the dismissal of the people.”<sup>26</sup> This task should be done in a reverent and inconspicuous manner. In large communities it should be performed after the liturgy so that the assembly is not held captive for an inordinate amount of time.

### **Posture**

Many communities have found the practice of standing throughout the communion rite to be beneficial. Standing is a posture of attentiveness and respect. When someone enters a room we stand and greet them out of courtesy and respect and to offer a sense of hospitality. When individuals return to their places after communion and kneel for private prayer a divisive dichotomy is created. At this moment some are standing to receive communion while others are kneeling in private prayer and the assembly ceases to exist; an assembly is not merely a conglomeration of disparate individuals, it is a people with a common purpose and goal. Standing together and being

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<sup>26</sup> GIRM #163

attentive to the presence of Christ in his body and blood of Christ and in our brothers and sisters unifies the bond of the assembly in its goal to be a sign of Christ to the world.

When all have received communion the assembly sits down together for a moment of shared silence.

### **Hymn of Praise**

After a time of silence has been observed the community may stand and sing a hymn, psalm or another song of praise. This under-utilized ritual element is new to the liturgy since the Second Vatican Council. The strophic hymn seems to fit best at this time because the Hymn of Praise stands on its own. The community is joining in the simple act of singing a hymn and the music here does not accompany any ritual gesture or act. Thus, the hymn text serves as proclamation and the music is the solitary focus of those gathered. Communities that choose to sing a Hymn of Praise often elect to forgo singing a closing hymn in favor of instrumental recessional music. Theologically this makes sense since when the priest says, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” the assembly actually departs following the processional cross and ministers, instead of remaining for several more minutes to sing a closing song.

### **Prayer After Communion**

The communion rite concludes with the Prayer after communion. “First appearing in the Fifth century and arranged in the manner of the Collect at the beginning of Mass, it was called the “prayer at the conclusion” since it ended the eucharistic celebration. It was also known as the Prayer after communion or the Postcommunion.”<sup>27</sup> Thanksgiving is not the focus of this prayer. Instead, its purpose is to ask that the Eucharist we have just received may transform our lives and make us steadfast disciples

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, pg. 124

of Jesus Christ. The Prayer after Communion should either be preceded by silence or there should be a brief silence after the invitation to prayer.

### **Conclusion**

Liturgists, pastoral musicians, liturgical ministers and clergy need to collaborate in concert to transform the communion rite into a seamless garment, a tapestry that depicts how we are to live as Christians in the world. If these ministers commit to evaluating the details of how the communion rite is celebrated in their parishes their communities will benefit from a profound and new understanding of the rite. There are several broad areas that most parish communities could improve upon if they made a strong effort to promote liturgical catechesis on the subject. This catechesis could happen verbally before the liturgy begins and during homilies. Bulletin articles and inserts are another good opportunity to disseminate liturgical catechesis to the community. In addition, a simple way this verbal and written catechesis can be reinforced is through non-verbal modeling of reverence, gestures and postures by ministers and community leaders. Great care should be taken to address the following three issues in order that the communion rite may be celebrated well;

1. Our symbols should be robust so that they radiate the love of Christ for all humankind. They should be authentic and vital and engage the senses. Bread and wine are the primary symbols used in the communion rite. Using freshly baked unleavened bread for the Eucharist more fully symbolizes what Saint Augustine taught; that, as members of the one body of Christ, we are to become bread broken and wine poured out for others. This is readily demonstrated when, during the breaking of the bread, loaves of bread are broken into pieces for communion.

- Parishes would do well to consider developing bread-baking ministries. There is great intimacy in the knowledge that a member of the community has baked with care the Bread of Life that both nourishes and sustains us. Red wine should be used in our celebrations to more fully symbolize the blood of Christ shed for all. Even more importantly, communities should be offering communion under both kinds at all Eucharistic celebrations. Communion has a fuller form as a sign when both bread and wine are offered. When communities are attentive to the quality of these symbols the lavish nature of Christ's love for us is demonstrated.
2. Musicians should make sure that the music they use at this point in the liturgy actually serves the ritual and fosters participation. Far too often musicians select music for the communion rite that does not work because of a lack of knowledge of the structure and purpose of the ritual. If they would familiarize themselves with documents such as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Music in Catholic Worship, Liturgical Music Today (and others) musicians would have a greater understanding of how music should function during the communion rite. Music has the power to draw people deeper into ritual prayer and bind them closer in solidarity of purpose. With attention to the following musicians can make a solid contribution to the celebration of the rite;
    - a. Singing the Lord's Prayer is an option but the music of the chosen arrangement should not dominate or distract from the text of the prayer.
    - b. No music should be used during the Rite of Peace.
    - c. The Lamb of God litany accompanies the breaking of the bread and pouring of the wine. It may be sung with cantor and/or choir and

assembly. The litany may be repeated as necessary to accompany the entire ritual action.

- d. The communion song starts as the priest receives communion and concludes when the last person has received.
- e. Care should be taken in selecting the text and music used for the communion procession. Generally, antiphonal music with refrains that can be memorized work best. Musicians should consult the liturgical books, scripture (especially psalms), the Church's music documents and the plethora of music being produced by composers to select songs for the procession. The 1974 document *Music in Catholic Worship* offers wise criteria for selecting communion songs. It says,

“The communion song should foster a sense of unity. It should be simple and not demand great effort. It gives expression to the joy of unity of the body of Christ and the fulfillment of the mystery being celebrated...In general during the most important seasons of the Church year, Easter, Lent, Christmas and Advent, it is preferable that most songs used at the communion be seasonal in nature.”<sup>28</sup>

Strong musical leadership and the selection of appropriate music are fundamental to fostering communal song during the communion ritual.

Robust communal song at communion helps the community make realize the bigger picture. We no longer live for ourselves but for Christ. Living for Christ means building loving relationships with others.

- f. Following communion, after a time of silence, a hymn or song of praise may be sung. Strophic hymns are often successful at this point in the liturgy. It is best not to opt to use the hymn of praise when there is going

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<sup>28</sup> *Music in Catholic Worship*, #62 as found in *The Liturgy Documents*, pg. 288

to be a closing song. Otherwise the assembly will likely suffer from musical fatigue. Communities that utilize the hymn of praise option should play instrumental music to accompany the closing procession.

3. The postures we assume speak volumes about our self-understanding and our world-view. This is especially true during the communion rite. Assuming the *orans* posture during the Lord's Prayer models peaceful intent voiced in the text of the prayer. Standing for the reception of communion and until the entire assembly has received the Sacrament is a sign of respect and attentiveness for the body and blood of the Lord and for our brothers and sisters who are members of the body of Christ. A slight bow of the head before receiving the body and blood of the Lord is a sign of reverence and acknowledges the awesome mystery we are about to enter into. In the end all of these postures and gestures show our care and reverence for God and for our neighbor. Their importance cannot be underestimated. Community leaders need to take seriously their responsibility to educate their membership about postures used at Mass.

Many communities have put a good deal of effort into making the communion rite both an example of Christ's love poured out for us and a time of communal sharing. Much work still needs to be done though. If communities throughout the United States would put a little more time, thought and energy into the planning and celebration of the rite Catholics would have a much richer understanding of their faith. This examination has offered many suggestions that could be helpful to that end. Ultimately, it is hoped that strong celebrations of the communion ritual will make apparent the explicit connections

between our reception of the body and blood of Christ and our mission to serve others as Christ's body and blood in the world.

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