

IX. “The Body of Christ...” “Amen!”

This is the ninth in a series of eleven or so articles on the celebration of the Mass. Article #10 is entitled, *Proceeding with Communion I*

“The Body of Christ...”

The minister of Communion speaks this phrase often, “The Body of Christ.” Ministers of the Eucharist say it thousands of times in churches every Sunday. Doesn’t it just become part of the routine of our lives – both for ministers and faithful alike? And yet, doesn’t it also take on greater significance from time to time, or at special moments of our lives – one’s first communion, one’s wedding, or at the funeral of a loved one?

How might we deepen our awareness of the meaning of this small gem of a dialogue? What is its purpose?

It is a statement of belief that the gathered Church makes in Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. It is further an acknowledgement of the presence of Christ in the faithful and union with Christ in his Body, the Church. See how St. Augustine framed both of these aspects of the mystery of the Body of Christ in the early 5th century:

“If you wish to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle as he says to the faithful, ‘You are the body of Christ and His members.’ (1Cor 12:27) If therefore, you are the body of Christ and His members, your mystery has been placed on the Lord’s table, you receive your mystery.

You reply “Amen” to that which you are, and by replying, you consent.

For you hear, “The Body of Christ,” and you reply, “Amen.”

Be a member of the body of Christ so that your “Amen” may be true.”

But, why in bread? ...

Let us listen to the Apostle who said, ‘We though many, are one bread, one body.’”

(1Cor 10:17) [Augustine, IIA6.1 Sermon 272 (dated 405-411) Ed PL 38.1246-1248]

Here is the reason why ministers of Communion are instructed to say, “The Body of Christ,” and not “This is Jesus,” or “Receive the Body of Christ.” This brief and humble acclamation invites all the faithful to recognize the Body of Christ in the consecrated bread and in the People of God receiving Communion! It is an open-ended acclamation: “You reply ‘Amen’ to that which you are, and by replying, you consent... Be a member of the body of Christ so that your ‘Amen may be true!’”

1. Gestures of Reverence at Communion

Recognizing the power of gestures and the importance of the body, the *General Instruction* directs the faithful to employ several gestures of reverence as part of receiving Communion: standing, a head bow, and receiving either on the tongue or in the hand.

“The norm for reception of Holy Communion in the dioceses of the United States is *standing*. Communicants should not be denied Holy Communion because they kneel. Rather, such instances should be addressed pastorally, by providing the faithful with proper *catechesis* on the reasons for this norm.” (GIRM 160)

a) How is Standing an Act of Reverence?

The statement “The Body of Christ,” not only reminds us that the bread we see has been transformed but it also reminds us that we, the recipients, are being transformed into what we receive. Redeemed by Christ, we are no longer alienated sinners but now intimately connected to Christ and one another through his Body and Blood.

So, all proceed to Communion as a people who signify the Body of Christ, risen in glory. The Greek word for resurrection means that Jesus “stood up!” – something the dead do not do. The faithful manifest the Body of Christ, therefore, as risen and graced. Recall, too, how St. Augustine counseled us that Communion is more than a private moment with our Lord. It is also a moment of union with our brothers and sisters, members of the same Body of Christ.

“When receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence is also made before receiving the Precious Blood.” (GIRM 160)

b) How is Receiving Communion in the Hand an Act of Reverence?

St. Cyril of Jerusalem told his newly baptized, “Make a throne of your hand to receive the Lord of Life!” Others picture their hand as a beggar’s bowl, coming, hungry, to receive the Bread of Life. Still others find a feeling of sorrow or emptiness rising up when they cup their hands. Yet others express a profound sense of humility as they approach to receive the Lamb of God. Attending to these, and other such experiences of one’s open palm, can put a person in touch with a deep sense of longing, desiring, and reverence for the One he / she is about to receive.

c) How is “Amen” an Act of Reverence?

Saying “Amen,” means we assent to our faith with our head and heart and will. Not only do we believe in the real presence but we also commit ourselves to living and acting as Jesus did and does.

Tertullian, a 3rd century North African theologian, applied the Latin term *sacramentum* to the rites of baptism and Eucharist. *Sacramentum* referred to the oath of allegiance that soldiers made to the Roman emperor to serve him, even with their life. At this time in the Church’s history, persecutions were common enough to make baptism into Christ a commitment that could mean dying for the faith. Thus, saying “Amen” to the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ serves as a Catholic pledge of allegiance to follow Christ.

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

d) How is Receiving Communion Itself an Act of Reverence?

The act of receiving is itself another powerful and meaningful gesture. “To receive” means to get, to obtain, to admit, to let in, and to accept. It implies a certain openness in the person receiving. It points to a hoped-for capacity in the person to be nourished by what one receives and to be nourished by the generosity of the Giver. Receiving, therefore, is an act that renders one vulnerable to what is given and to the one giving. Will the gift meet all my needs? Will the gift be truly what I desire? Will I ever be hungry again?

The procession of the faithful, the Body of Christ in the world is a procession of the hungry, the needy, and the hopeful. We may not always recognize each other in this manner, but all of God’s people (except possibly the very youngest) approach the minister of Communion with some experience of these things.

What then do we see? We see members of our worshipping assembly engaging in a dialogic act of proclamation and response as well as a reciprocal act of giving and receiving. The minister of Communion, who herself has just been nourished by the Body and Blood of Christ, now serves the assembled Body by giving them food and drink. Even with her own vulnerability, demonstrated in needing to receive Communion, she and other ministers welcome fellow sinners and nourish these same members of the Body with food and drink from heaven.

e) How is Serving Communion Itself an Act of Reverence?

The minister of Communion has a dual call – to reverence the presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine and to reverence the Body of Christ in the world.

Serving the assembled Body is an invitation to be reverent toward the vulnerabilities of all who present themselves for Communion. The minister of Communion might meditate on the mystery of the all too human family assembled for worship by noticing its many different manifestations through people’s hands. Some are rough, some smooth; some are long and tight, some soft and fleshy; some are ancient and wrinkled, some are dainty and small. It’s the mystery of the Body of Christ revealed in hands.

An Excursus – the Eucharist as Sign of Disunity

Roman Catholics do not practice inter-communion with other Christians. Nor are Catholics welcomed to the table at Eucharistic celebrations of the Orthodox Church. The Eucharist functions as a sign of unity *and* disunity as it manifests the divisions within Christianity. Perhaps the continued experience of the scandal and pain of Christian disunity might promote new and creative efforts for reconciliation among the Christian churches.

“I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (John 14:20)

For Reflection:

“What you see is transitory, but the invisible reality signified does not pass away, but abides. Behold, it is received, eaten, and consumed. Is the body of Christ consumed? Not at all! Here, on earth, His members are purified, there they are crowned. Thus, what is signified will endure eternally, even though what signifies it seems to pass away. *Receive, then, in such a way that you may take thought for yourselves, that you may have unity in your hearts, that you may fix your hearts always on high.*”
St. Augustine, *IIA6.2 Sermon 227*
(dated 412-413, 416-417)

For discussion/reflection:

- What does going to Communion mean to you?
- What does saying *Amen* when receiving the Eucharist mean to you?
- What new things did you learn from this article?
- Do you attend to the Body of Christ in the world as all receive Communion? Do you receive it?
- What does reverence for the Body of Christ mean to you?