

## **Should Communion Services Substitute For Mass?**

"Amen," she said, receiving the wafer in her hand. Mary reverently stepped to the side, placed the host in her mouth, and returned to her pew. After the final prayers, she and the other worshippers walked toward the doors, wished one another well, and left to start their Monday.

Their priest was away that morning, so the parish did not offer a Mass. Mary and her friends celebrated a communion service instead.

What happened here? A beautiful way to start the day? Or the beginning of the end of Eucharist?

Communion services are springing up in parishes like springtime dandelions in an open field. At first, they add color to the landscape. But the more they grow in number, the more we should wonder just what we let take root.

For the first time in modern history, the faithful are accepting a communion service as the solution for a day without Mass. A day without Mass used to be a day without communion. But now the desire for communion has increased while the number of priests has decreased. Instead of going without communion, people have accepted a substitute for the Mass.

The past reveals no widespread call for communion outside of Mass. People received communion less frequently either because they felt unworthy or because they lived where priests were scarce. Priests departing from missionary regions did not consecrate extra hosts for tabernacles. When communities had no priests, they had no communion.

In our own century the desire for communion has ripened. But now that people hunger for the Eucharist we don't have as many priests to provide it. These two factors--frequent reception of communion and the priest shortage--have created a new demand. People want communion outside of Mass.

Communion services always existed, but they usually served communion to the sick in their home. Such rituals developed not because a priest was absent, but because a sick parishioner was absent.

As the millennium ends, a typical parish still expects Mass on Sunday. A priest who plans to be away some weekend can usually find a replacement. However, priests observe that the search is becoming difficult. Sunday Masses have not yet been commonly replaced by communion services. But on weekdays the switch often appeals to parishioners and pastors alike. Because communion services are spreading so swiftly on weekdays, parishes should prudently evaluate the trend before they have to make decisions about Sundays without a priest.

Surely the desire for communion services comes from pure hearts. If the Eucharist is the central sacrament of our faith, if the church urges us to frequent communion, and if people have developed a sincere devotion to the real presence of Christ, communion services may provide wholesome sustenance.

However, the communion service obscures Christian responsibility. In memory of Jesus, we celebrate the sacrificial meal of the Last Supper. The substitution of communion service for Mass removes the sacrificial element from our communion prayer. A great mystery faces the peril of negligence: our sacred covenant with God.

What is the Mass? The Mass is the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Through sign and ritual, we participate in the saving sacrifice of Jesus. He offered himself on the cross so that we might have life. At Mass, we become present to that one perfect offering of Jesus on Calvary.

Here's what happens: First the Spirit of God gathers us and forms us as a community to hear and reflect on the Word of God. We prepare our covenantal offering: bread, wine, and gifts for the church and the poor--symbols of our life, our work, and our commitment. In the prayer of thanksgiving, the Holy Spirit transforms our bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. In union with Christ, we offer this perfect gift to God in sacrifice on the altar, together with the gift of ourselves.

But the ritual does not stop there. Because this is a communion sacrifice, we also eat and drink from what we offer to God. Our gifts return to us sanctified. We eat the sacred bread and drink the holy cup that we might have life with Christ and communion with one another. Our communion consecrates our community. This sacrificial meal we call "Eucharist", from the Greek word meaning "giving thanks."

What is a communion service? In a communion service we eat communion breads, the body of Christ, left over from a previous celebration of the Mass. It is indeed a service of sacramental communion, but it is not the ritual participation in the sacrifice of Christ. We make no offering upon the altar. Instead, we eat the fruits of a sacrifice made by others.

What's the big deal? The Mass strikes a courteous balance between the actions of God and those of the people. It ritualizes our covenant with God in this great sacrificial action.

The communion service ritualizes something else. It ritualizes our acceptance of God's part of the covenant, but it fails to express our part as the Mass does. Instead of offering ourselves, we just accept God's gift. The Mass is a living sacrifice which transforms our offering. At the communion service we have missed the transformation and neglected the offering.

So the communion service obscures a great mystery, our covenant with God.

The difference resembles that between a potluck dinner in which the meal comes to life before us, and leftovers from the refrigerator. Both can feed hunger, but the first better satisfies the soul.

If communion services differ so greatly from Mass, why does it not appear so to the faithful? Sadly, for centuries we have been treating the communion rite of the Mass like a communion service. Our parish celebrations continue to ignore rubrics which stress the sacrificial nature of the Mass. For example, During the Lamb of God, the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cups prefigure the sharing which will follow. From one broken loaf and one poured cup we become one. However, we usually start with many hosts, "pre-broken" bread. Hosts expedite the distribution, but starting from one loaf would strengthen the symbol of the one sacrificial offering and communion.

Also during the Lamb of God, the priest who uses a large host instead of a loaf of bread breaks it into several pieces. He should do this so it may be shared with some of the community. Yet many priests continue to eat all the pieces they break.

A communion song should unite the faithful in one voice. Yet our assemblies sing their weakest at communion. Some parishes don't offer a communion song at all because people prefer private prayer to singing. The song which could emphasize our communal share in God's covenant instead symbolizes the disassociation of the communicant from the community's worship.

From the Lord's Prayer to the end of communion, the Mass never instructs us to change posture. But in most parishes, the faithful kneel after the Lamb of God. It's nowhere in the rubrics. Standing invites the faithful more readily into the communion song and into union with all who are receiving. Kneeling draws the worshipper into private prayer, away from the communal action of Eucharist. Although kneeling helps many worshippers express their reverence for the Eucharist, it ritualizes the privatization of communion.

Communion reaches its full sacrificial expression when the faithful receive both the body and blood of Christ. Yet many parishes still do not regularly offer the cup, and many faithful refuse the offer. Jesus said, "Eat" and "Drink"--not "You don't have to drink this." Granted, Christ is fully present in the consecrated bread alone and the consecrated wine alone. But people are bypassing the common cup, even though it would reinforce our communion with one another in the blood of the sacrifice.

The sacrifice is complete when the communion we receive is actually the bread and wine offered and transformed at the same Mass. However, at almost every Mass, a communion minister goes to the tabernacle to take leftover breads from a previous Mass to a communion station. The body of Christ is the body of Christ, right? Well, yes and no. The bread in the tabernacle is really Christ, but from yesterday's Mass. The body of Christ from the altar is the holy and living sacrifice of this Mass. Communion from the altar completes the transformation of our lives which we offered to God at that same altar in this same Mass. The faithful who receive communion from the tabernacle at Mass short-circuit the sacrifice.

The tabernacle itself primarily houses those communion breads which will be brought to the sick. It is also an object of devotion in our churches. A tabernacle as such has very little to do with Mass. Yet many of our churches keep tabernacles in central places where they may draw the faithful from the more important piece of furniture as far as the Mass is concerned, the altar. The real presence of Christ in the tabernacle deserves our devotion, but we design churches first and foremost for the sacrifice of the Mass, not for eucharistic adoration.

Mass concludes with a formal dismissal. It sends us as a body into the world. We worship together, we offer together, we receive communion together, and we are dismissed together with a common mission--to live the Gospel. However, many Catholics still leave Mass early, usually right after they've received communion. They got what they came for: private communion, not communal prayer. Leaving Mass early is rude to other worshippers, isolates the communicant from the rest of the community, and fails to accept the formal dismissal, the final purpose of our gathering.

The result of our careless communion rites is that people see little difference between communion in a communion service and communion at Mass. But the difference is huge. We

contribute to misunderstanding from the lazy way we celebrate the communion rite of Mass in our parishes.

No wonder then that certain departures have begun. Daily communion services may replace daily Mass. Multiple communion services may be scheduled on the same day. The sick may receive communion after a communion service rather than after Mass. Some Catholics say the communion service is "Mass without a priest."

At communion services we take without offering. Once in a while it may not be bad, but how do we justify regularly tasting the benefits of God's largesse without first fulfilling our part of the covenant? Only at Mass do we offer God our lives and ritualize their transformation.

The best solution remains obscure, but our choice in these years will have far-reaching effects for the next generation. Perhaps we should consider other options:

Pray with scriptures but without communion. The faithful could gather for the day's prayer either with a liturgy of the word or with morning or evening prayer from the liturgy of the hours. Celebrate benediction. The revised rite of benediction permits a lengthy period of adoration for scripture and prayer. When our gratitude for the Eucharist meets the sadness of fewer Masses, benediction could sustain eucharistic devotion while underscoring the distinction between Mass and a substitute service. Pray with bread and wine but without a priest. Families and friends could gather in homes. They could read and reflect on the scriptures, prepare bread and wine or grape juice, pray a blessing over the food, and share a symbolic meal. No, it's not Eucharist as the Roman Catholic Church understands it. But an extended prayer before meals could more faithfully ritualize the sacrificial dimension of Christian life than the communion service does. Loosen the requirements for ordination to the priesthood. Women and married men are excluded from priestly ordination in the Roman Catholic Church. A change in policy would invite more candidates for orders and permit more frequent Eucharist. Pope John Paul II has closed the question of ordaining women. He has stated the Church does not have the authority to do so. Many theologians and faithful have questioned the Pope's position, but the policy cannot change without the threat of severe divisions within the Church. There are instances of married Catholic priests. Eastern Churches in union with Rome have married priests. Some non-Catholic ministers who are received into the full communion of the Catholic Church may apply for priesthood--wife, kids, and all. History knows of married priests, but not women priests. The prospect of a married priesthood is surprisingly popular among Catholics. Catholics do not seem to get the point of priestly celibacy, and would gladly surrender it to increase the availability of the Mass. Let priests who left come back. Many priests left their ministry over the past few decades for various reasons, but often because they preferred marriage over celibacy. Many faithful would let them return to celebrate Mass. Current church discipline does not allow the return of former priests who married. Work harder on vocation recruitment. We all share this responsibility--priests, religious, parents, and all parishioners. Former generations promoted and called forth vocations to priestly ministry much better than ours does. Many parents discourage their children from remaining single for life. Many priests seem unhappy. If we want more priests, we have to ask people to consider the vocation. The faithful who attend communion services do so out of a true sense of devotion, a belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, a desire to worship, and a willingness to join with others in prayer. But in doing so, are they unwittingly undermining the power of the very sacrifice which permits them the joy of communion?

To get the answer we can take two steps. We can improve our celebrations of the communion rite at Mass, and we can evaluate the prayer we substitute for it. Eucharist is the sacrifice of our covenant with God. Whenever we express it poorly or replace it with something else, we deceive the body of Christ.

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