

# Eucharist and the Mystical Body of Christ - The Church

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## Introduction

“I believe” was going to be a problem. As we were anticipating the changes to the English translation of the missal a few years ago, one of the many objections concerned the first two words of the Nicene Creed. English-speaking Catholics were used to saying “We believe in one God,” and we believed that that was better than “I believe.” Never mind that for the previous 40 years, Mexicans were saying “*Creo*,” Italians were saying, “*Io credo*,” and the French were saying, “*Je crois*” - all first person singular. The Germans, who are still saying, “*Wir glauben*,” agreed with us, but not too many people realized all of this. We Americans often forget that some people around the globe speak other languages and follow other customs.

There were sound reasons pro and con making this change to the creed. I’m not going to rehash them all. I just want to acknowledge why this became a sticking point. Post-Vatican II Catholics had learned that the mass is not an exercise of “me with God.” The mass is also about “me with you.” This 3-D interpretation of the mass contrasted with the preconciliar liturgy, which invited a more interior participation. Postconciliar Catholic piety hallowed communal participation. To many Catholics the proposed change in translation to the creed a few years ago raised fears that the mass was becoming 2-D again. This did not sit well especially with those of us who lived through the conciliar years.

In this talk I’ve been asked to reflect on the eucharist and the mystical body of Christ, the Church, by making a further distinction about the “we” who believe in God. The planners for this conference explained it this way: “[It is] ultimately the Church as a whole that receives the Eucharist, not just lots of individuals.” There is, if you will, a fourth dimension: The mass concerns “me,” it concerns “me with God,” it concerns “lots of me’s simultaneously with God,” and it concerns “us as one with God.” In the Vietnamese language there are two different words for “we.” One includes the person to whom I’m talking, and the other does not. If I’m standing here with three friends, and I tell you, “We are going out to dinner,” you will know from my choice of the word for “we” whether “we” includes you, or if “we” just means “us.” This talk is reflecting on “we” in that way: When we celebrate, is it a collective “we” in the way we sit at the same table, or is it a parallel “we” in the way that we stand the same elevator? The answer, as with any close relationship, is complicated.

This talk has two main parts. At the beginning, I’ll review some of the documentation from the missal, both its rubrics and its prayers. Then I’ll give a shorter presentation on spirituality: what impedes and what helps our participation in the eucharist as individuals and as the mystical body of Christ.

## Documentation

### The General Instruction on the Roman Missal

The General Instruction on the Roman Missal makes explicit observations about the role of the assembly. To put this in context, all the principal liturgical books include an introduction that explains such things as the meaning of the celebration, its flow, the roles of different ministers, and the adaptations permitted to conferences of bishops. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal thus includes a section on the duties and ministries in the mass. There you find an overview of the tasks of bishops, priests and deacons, as well as of the “People of God,” also called “the faithful.” In paragraph 95 the instruction speaks about their duties as those that pertain to a collective.

In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people of God’s own possession and a royal Priesthood, so that they may give thanks to God and offer the unblemished sacrificial Victim not only by means of the hands of the Priest but also together with him and so that they may learn to offer their very selves. They should, moreover, take care to show this by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration.

They are consequently to avoid any appearance of singularity or division, keeping in mind that they have only one Father in heaven and that hence are all brothers or sisters one to the other.

The duties of the faithful come from their baptismal role as articulated in 1 Peter 2:9, which calls Christians “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own.” They have priestly duties: giving thanks to God and offering the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. They do this not apart from the priest, but together with him. One dimension of unity is that of the faithful with the priest.

The faithful show this in two distinct ways. One is their “deep religious sense.” Everyone comes to mass with an internal piety that they are expected to exercise. The other is “their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration.” This implies the sad truth that not everyone who shows up for mass has been nice to the others who show up for mass. This launches into the twin concerns about “singularity” and “division.” We come not to express our singularity, to distance ourselves from all other believers. We come not to take up sides. We have one Father, and we are all brothers and sisters.

Note too, that we are not only expected to remove singularity and division, but we are to “avoid any appearance” of them. Even if you feel connected to everyone, if your external actions do not make unity apparent, you may inhibit others from joining in the prayer.

Paragraph 96 presents the practical ways that this takes place.

Moreover, they are to form one body, whether in hearing the Word of God, or in taking part in the prayers and in the singing, or above all by the common offering of the Sacrifice and by participating together at the Lord’s table. This unity is beautifully apparent from the gestures and bodily postures observed together by the faithful.

The mystical body of Christ expresses its unity in several different ways. Notice the hierarchy of participations in this paragraph. It starts with “hearing the Word of God.” Even when people are silent at the proclamation of the readings, they form one body by the attention they give together. Next it encourages “taking part in the prayers and in the singing.” Our spoken and sung words, especially when they are addressed to God, express the unified voice of the People of God. As our conference theme has it: “Formed as One: Union of Voices, Unity of Hearts.” Finally, paragraph 96 says that we are united in “the common offering of the Sacrifice and by participating together at the Lord’s table.” I’ll come back to this, but please note how the General Instruction links up two important parts of the mass: offering and communion. Both require participation. If you have come as the priestly people to offer sacrifice, the missal presumes that you are also sharing in communion; the sacrifice is incomplete without communion. If you have come to receive communion, the missal presumes that you have also come to offer sacrifice. One of the main differences between mass and a communion service is that a communion service does not involve your sacrifice; only your communion.

Finally, this paragraph notes that common gestures and postures make unity apparent. This resolves the concern in paragraph 95 that we should avoid the appearance of singularity and division. We can do that by participating in all these ways.

Earlier, in paragraph 42, the General Instruction made a similar point where it introduces its section on gestures and bodily postures.

The gestures and bodily posture of both the Priest, the Deacon, and the ministers, and also of the people, must be conducive to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, to making clear the true and full meaning of its different parts, and to fostering the participation of all. Attention must therefore be paid to what is determined by this *General Instruction* and by the traditional practice of the Roman Rite and to what serves the common spiritual good of the People of God, rather than private inclination or arbitrary choice.

A common bodily posture, to be observed by all those taking part, is a sign of the unity of the members of the Christian community gathered together for the Sacred Liturgy, for it expresses the intentions and spiritual attitude of the participants and also fosters them.

The General Instruction first came out in 1969. It has received several updates, but you can find here the mind of the Church as it stepped into the new world of postconciliar liturgy. The first paragraph on this slide was added with the third edition of the missal in 2002. At that time, after thirty years of experience with the revised mass, the Vatican expressed its fears over the dangers of “private inclination” and “arbitrary choice.” If you borrow language from paragraph 96, you could argue that even when these are motivated by “a deep religious sense,” they sometimes sidestep “charity toward brothers and sisters who participate... in the same celebration” and may cause unintended friction to the unity of the People of God.

**Musicians will note that music has the power to unite the People of God into a single voice. For example, one of the purposes of the Entrance Chant, according to paragraph 47, is to “foster the unity of those who have gathered.” Some musicians do this well; others do not. I'll return to this theme at the end.**

### **Parts of the Mass**

**Having examined some of the General Instruction, let's turn now to various parts of the mass. These will show how the liturgy expresses in practice the unity of the church, the mystical body of Christ. I'll focus on the collect and on parts of the liturgy of the eucharist.**

**Here's how the General Instruction describes the collect in paragraph 54:**

**Next the Priest calls upon the people to pray and everybody, together with the Priest, observes a brief silence so that they may become aware of being in God's presence and may call to mind their intentions. Then the Priest pronounces the prayer usually called the “Collect” and through which the character of the celebration finds expression....**

**The people, joining in this petition, make the prayer their own by means of the acclamation *Amen*.**

**The words “Let us pray” invite the priestly People of God to do just that. All are expected to pray both through the silence that follows these words and through the oration. The revised translation of these prayers made them more difficult to declaim, but it is paramount for each priest and member of the faithful to enter into the collect with deep understanding. Later at mass, during the universal prayer (or prayer of the faithful), the petitioner commonly concludes the list by inviting people to offer their personal intentions in silence. The postconciliar liturgy never envisioned that; instead, it envisioned that people were calling to mind their personal intentions here at the beginning of mass in the silence that follows “Let us pray.” Then the priest collects those prayers and presents them to God. The priestly people are not excluded from this prayer. Their intentions are assumed into it, and they are to voice a priestly assent with their final “Amen.”**

**In the liturgy of the eucharist, the universal prayer even more explicitly exercises the priesthood of the body of Christ. Paragraph 69 makes it clear.**

**In the Universal Prayer or Prayer of the Faithful, the people respond in some sense to the Word of God which they have received in faith and, exercising the office of their baptismal Priesthood, offer prayers to God for the salvation of all.**

**The universal prayer was new to the liturgy after the council, though it had antecedents in the middle ages. Because of its newness, the General Instruction explained more of its purpose, which it directly linked to 1 Peter 2:9. Through baptism all become sharers in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Priests pray. They also offer sacrifice, but first they pray. That is the reason for the prayer “of the faithful.” This also explains why the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults recommends the dismissal of catechumens before the universal prayer, and why the missal requests that the newly baptized be present for this part of the Easter Vigil. Before baptism, catechumens lack the tools to pray as priests; after**

baptism, according to rubric 58 at the Easter Vigil, the priest “directs the Universal Prayer, in which the newly baptized participate for the first time.” You may say, “Come on; they have been at mass before. They have been present for the universal prayer.” The liturgy will answer, “Fine, but even if they were present, they were not able fully to participate in the universal prayer before their baptism.”

The same is true of the eucharistic prayer. The priest recites most of the words himself, but the people are expected to participate. Paragraph 78 explains its purpose.

Now the center and high point of the entire celebration begins, namely, the Eucharistic Prayer itself, that is, the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The Priest calls upon the people to lift up their hearts towards the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving; he associates the people with himself in the Prayer that he addresses in the name of the entire community to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the meaning of this Prayer is that the whole congregation of the faithful joins with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice. The Eucharistic Prayer requires that everybody listens to it with reverence and in silence.

Even though this is a prayer of “thanksgiving and sanctification,” its title focuses on the first of these descriptors. It is not the “consecration prayer.” It is the “eucharistic prayer.”

The priest does not offer it alone. He asks the people to lift up their hearts, and “he associates the people with himself.” This had to be stated after the council because priests were used to offering the prayer in a low voice. That legislation has changed; the priest is to use full voice in order to associate the people with himself. As the priest unites the people to himself, so all the faithful join with Christ in confessing God’s mighty deeds and in offering sacrifice. These are priestly duties assumed by the mystical body of Christ.

The Lord’s Prayer follows the eucharistic prayer according to an ancient practice. Once we stand in the presence of the sacramental body and blood of Christ, what on earth dare we say? We dare to say the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. As you know, the prayer uses plural pronouns. It’s not “My Father,” but “Our Father.” Jesus taught his disciples to pray as a collective. This may explain why the practice of joining hands has perdured in some parishes, even though no rubrics call for it. People instinctively desire a physical connection in addition to the vocal connection. Some people condemn the practice of joining hands as illicit, while others find it so expressive that they have developed the custom in ways that call for an advanced sequence of rubrics: Joining hands is only the first stage. Many people then raise their hands for the acclamation, “For the kingdom.” At the end, before releasing, they squeeze. (I know you’re doing it.) None of that is in the rubrics, yet the grassroots practice has become widespread. It’s like at professional baseball games where the scoreboard instructs the fans when it is time to begin a rhythmic chant and what words to say. Sometimes a small group of fans starts chanting on their own with amazing

success throughout their section of the stadium without having received the proper authorization from the scoreboard.

The sign of peace is another expression of the body of Christ. At number 128 the Order of Mass calls it a sign “that expresses peace, communion, and charity.” Note what it does not say. It is not a sign of reconciliation, as if we are sinners expressing repentance before communion. That happened earlier. It is not a sign of greeting; that should have happened on the way into church. Rather it is a sign that expresses the peace, communion and charity that does exist in the mystical body of Christ. As between spouses a kiss may precede their lovemaking, so at mass a kiss may precede our communion. The sign of peace expresses our unity before we express it sublimely in holy communion.

This brings me to a part of the mass that I think goes underappreciated, the prayer after communion. The meaning of eucharistic communion is expressed in this prayer. Let me give you three examples chosen at random from this week’s missal. First, from the Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time:

Grant, we pray, O Lord,  
that, having been replenished by such great gifts,  
we may gain the prize of salvation  
and never cease to praise you.  
Through Christ our Lord.

Then, here is the Prayer after Communion from today’s Memorial of St. Benedict, the abbot:

Having received this pledge of eternal life,  
we humbly beseech you, O Lord,  
that, attentive to the teaching of Saint Benedict,  
we may faithfully serve your designs  
and love one another with fervent charity.  
Through Christ our Lord.

And one from the Common of Virgins, which may be used with a mass of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha:

Renewed by partaking of this divine gift,  
we pray, O Lord our God,  
that by the example of the blessed N.,  
bearing in our body the Death of Jesus,  
we may strive to hold fast to you alone.  
Through Christ our Lord.

Notice what these prayers presume about eucharist and the mystical body of Christ. Once again, the priest has invited the entire assembly to pray with the invitation, “Let us pray.” Then he offers a prayer about what all are hoping will happen as a result of this communion. All answer “Amen.” However, look intently

at the way that these prayers use the first person plural to describe the assembly: “we..., having been replenished by such great gifts;” “Having received this pledge of eternal life;” and “Renewed by partaking of this divine gift.” These phrases presume that all those praying along have all just received communion. The priest invites the entire assembly to pray. When he describes the entire assembly to God, he refers to them as those who have been replenished and renewed by participating in sacramental communion. He then prays that something further will happen to them as a result: gaining the prize of salvation, loving one another, striving to hold fast to God alone.

My difficulty with this prayer as I offer it at mass is that I know there are some people in the assembly who have not received communion. They may be visitors, members of other denominations, catechumens, toddlers, Catholics in irregular marriages, or Catholics who feel unworthy to receive because of some unconfessed sin. The prayer after communion makes no room for them. As catechumens are incapable of participating fully in the prayer of the faithful, so baptized Christians who do not receive communion are incapable of participating fully in the prayer after communion. The presence of people who are not receiving communion puts the integrity of this prayer in jeopardy. Some Catholics tell those who are not receiving communion just to come up in line to receive a blessing; well, a blessing is not the same as communion. And you may think you have just included someone in the mass, but the prayer after communion will quickly set you straight. The proper resolution of this disconnect is not to decrease the number of people coming to church but to increase the number of those coming to communion.

Now, with all these “we” statements occupying the different parts of the mass, what are we to make of the “I” statements? The Nicene Creed is not the only example. The confiteor, one of the options for the penitential act, is also made in the first person singular: “I confess to almighty God.” Both these can be seen as expressions of the interior intention we bring individually to participate in common.

The priest has a similar set of prayers that he says quietly. At least, he is supposed to say them quietly. Some priests, motivated by the desire to keep prayers 3-D, say them aloud, but these have a different function. They facilitate the priest’s interior prayer so that he presides with sincerity. Some of these are in the plural, tempting priests to say them aloud: “Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away.” “By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” “With humble spirit and contrite heart may we be accepted by you, O Lord, and may our sacrifice in your sight this day be pleasing to you, Lord God.” “May this mingling of the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ bring eternal life to us who receive it.” “What has passed our lips as food, O Lord, may we possess in purity of heart, that what has been given to us in time may be our healing for eternity.” They use plural pronouns because the priest is praying privately for the people collectively.

But other private prayers unabashedly use singular pronouns: “Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, that I may worthily proclaim your holy Gospel.” “Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, through your Death gave life to the world, free me by this, your most holy Body and Blood, from all my sins and from every evil; keep me always faithful to your commandments, and never let me be parted from you.” “May the receiving of your Body and Blood, Lord Jesus Christ, not bring me to judgment and condemnation, but through your loving mercy be for me protection in mind and body and a healing remedy.” “May the Body of Christ keep me safe for eternal life.” “May the Blood of Christ keep me safe for eternal life.” These prayers are not threats to singularity and division; they are attempts at an interior renewal that give strength to the priest’s public prayers.

### Spirituality

This brings me to the final section of this talk, the spirituality of the eucharist and the mystical body of Christ. As you can tell from the preceding remarks, we have some habits that threaten an authentic expression of unity at the mass.

For example, some people focus on personal devotion. Some come to mass early in order to claim the last pew. Some occupy territory in a choir loft, cry room, or side chapel. They may do this out of what the instruction calls “a deep religious sense,” but they risk giving the appearance of singularity and division that the General Instruction hopes the faithful will avoid.

Others choose not to sing. They offer a variety of excuses: “I don’t like to sing.” “I don’t sing well.” “The book is too heavy.” “I can never find the music.” “I like to listen.” You’ve heard all these excuses and more, I’m sure. Again, to avoid the appearance of singularity, it would help the whole body of Christ if each member at least opened the hymnal to the proper page and followed along. People may think they are participating, but they do not give the appearance of doing it, and this may demonstrate, albeit unintentionally, a lack of charity to their brothers and sisters who participate in the same celebration.

Others choose their own postures and gestures. The Lord’s Prayer isn’t the only part of the mass that attracts gestural improvisation. When the priest says, “The Lord be with you,” some imitate his gesture when responding, “And with your spirit.” For communion, paragraph 160 of the General Instruction states, “The norm established for the Dioceses of the United States of America is that Holy Communion is to be received standing, unless an individual member of the faithful wishes to receive Communion while kneeling.” Some parishes have reinstalled communion rails, and some priests require people to kneel for communion, but this is not faithful to the directive of the USCCB. For the sake of uniformity the same paragraph asks the faithful to make a simple bow of the head, a nod if you will, before receiving communion. Yet we see many variations on this: a low bow, a genuflection, or a sign of the cross after receiving communion, none of which are in the rubrics. When people tell me that holding

hands for the Lord's Prayer violates the rubrics, I want to ask, "How far are you willing to go? Are you ready to forbid genuflecting before receiving communion? Making the sign of the cross after receiving communion?" Most people are not willing to go that far. So especially at communion we have found a time when flexibility outperforms uniformity out of respect for individuality.

In addition to these planned variations in posture and gesture, some people invite distractions at mass. Cellular devices are perhaps the greatest temptation to avoid participation. No matter if you are the priest, the deacon, the usher, or a member of the faithful staying a pew, the use of electronic devices fragments the body of Christ. Everyone is called to full, conscious, active participation in the mass, not full, conscious, active participation on their phones. Shutting off cellular devices upon arriving at church is an act of eucharistic spirituality. Because everyone is asked to participate in everything through silence, word, action and song, texting during mass is as dangerous to your spiritual well-being as texting while driving is to your physical well-being. Don't do it.

Many of us let other people distract us. Even though the General Instruction asks us to be charitable to those who worship with us, we focus overmuch on the clothes that others wear, hairstyles, tattoos, the misbehavior of children, the tempo of the music, the quality of the homily, or the inattention of servers. We are so preoccupied with the inattention of others that we haven't noticed how inattentive we have just become.

More problems arise after receiving holy communion. Some communicants receive, then turn toward the tabernacle and genuflect before returning to their pew, or they go immediately to the side chapel where the tabernacle is located to pray there. These behaviors make me wonder what such communicants think they just swallowed. They demonstrate the unacceptable belief that the real presence of Christ in the tabernacle is more real than the real presence of Christ at the consecration of the mass. Still others show no reverence at all after receiving communion. Instead, they exit directly through the doors to their cars in order to get on with their day. They show little appreciation for the nature of the eucharist and their responsibilities that remain in the final minutes of the mass.

Here are some spiritual tips that may help people enhance their participation in the eucharist as the mystical body of Christ:

Pay attention to everything. When the priest says, "Let us pray," pray. When the reader is proclaiming, listen. When petitions are being listed, think about those who need help. While the priest offers the eucharistic prayer, join him with all your heart.

Beware of creeping devotionalism. Some years ago surveys maintained that only a small percentage of Catholics believe in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. This sent shock waves through many leaders in the church. I am not a statistician, but those surveys make no sense to me. I can tell you from my personal experience as a pastor that whatever church those surveys surveyed isn't a parish I've worked for. The devotion of Catholics to the real presence of

Christ in the eucharist is exemplary. Nonetheless, the fear of unbelief among believers ignited the intensification of devotional elements during mass that emphasize the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament at the expense of the significance of eucharistic communion. At the consecration, for example, some priests hold the elements higher than the rubrics describe and longer than could ever be reasonably argued appropriate. Servers are ringing bells, which are a legitimate option, but ringing them three times, which is not. Some priests are genuflecting a long time during the consecration, drawing undue attention to one part of the entire eucharistic prayer. Again, it is not the “consecration prayer.” It is the “eucharistic prayer.” Its purpose is to give God thanks as much as to pray for sanctification. Such devotionism has given some Catholics the impression that being present for the consecration is more important than receiving communion, as if viewing the host and chalice is sufficient for participation.

But the greatest act of participation at mass is receiving holy communion. If someone is not receiving communion, this disquiet should lead to a deeper investigation for resolution. I understand that for some people the road to communion is difficult, but for others it is not. The disinterest in sharing communion each week is probably not so much a disbelief in the real presence of Christ as it is a misunderstanding of our duties. Canon law does not command us to “go to mass on Sundays,” but to “participate” at mass on Sundays. That is the obligation. It’s possible to go to mass every week and still not fulfill what the church expects.

A final note to musicians: You can make or break the unity of the body of Christ. You generally have the microphone before anyone else does. If your first words do not sufficiently welcome the assembly, you make it harder on everyone to get united. Similarly, if your use of the microphone during mass shuts down congregational singing, you are inhibiting the unified voice of the faithful. Use the microphone to invite, not to achieve dominion. Furthermore, when you are not singing or playing an instrument, remember that you are still expected to participate fully, consciously and actively in everything that is happening. For example, when you finish the Gloria, and the priest says, “Let us pray,” how do you fill that silence, you musicians? Are you praying for the needs you brought to mass that day? Or are you putting away the music of the Gloria and setting up the music for the responsorial psalm? If you have been sitting on the organ bench, when do you stand up? During that silence? Or after the collect? Even if you are in a choir loft, out of view of others where you cannot give the appearance of not participating, are you participating? Or are you using your private space as a location to check more items off your to-do list?

As NPM put in its description for this talk, “[It is] ultimately the Church as a whole that receives the Eucharist, not just lots of individuals.” Our participation begins individually: We each come to church because each of us can say, “I believe.” We participate with others: We join in silence, prayer, gesture and song. With Christ we offer sacrifice and at his invitation we receive communion. We are the mystical body of Christ, the Church. At the eucharist, we come as individuals, but we worship as one.