

Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

“Holy Communion has a fuller form as a sign when it takes place under both kinds.” That sentence opens a paragraph in the missal about receiving not only the Body of Christ at Mass but also his Blood. At the Last Supper, Jesus gave both commands: Take and eat. Take and drink.

During the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church deepened its doctrine on the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, concerns grew about the potential danger of spilling the Precious Blood of Christ. Prior to that, the faithful commonly shared communion under both kinds. The priest has always been required to do so. He prepares bread and wine at the altar, prays for their consecration, and completes the sacrifice by consuming the offering of the same bread and wine, now the Body and Blood of Christ.

To reassure the faithful, the Church developed a doctrine called “concomitance”: Whether you receive communion in a consecrated host or from the chalice, you receive the entire Christ, Body and Blood, soul and divinity.

About fifty years ago, the Church began to offer the Blood of Christ to the faithful on certain occasions. For example, at the ordination of a deacon, his parents and relatives were allowed to receive communion from the chalice at that Mass. Since then, permission to receive the Blood of Christ has extended more broadly. You don’t receive more of Christ when you receive under both kinds, but the sign is fuller.

The missal encourages communion from the cup with three reasons in that same paragraph about the fuller form of the sign. Two of these have to do with a banquet. The presence of wine at any meal signifies the joy of celebration, and this applies to the eucharist as well. It also applies to the kingdom of heaven, which the bible and many of our prayers envision as a place of banqueting. Wine therefore signifies joy on earth and joy in heaven. The missal gives one more reason why drinking the Blood of Christ is important: “the new and eternal Covenant is ratified in the Blood of the Lord.”

That point becomes clear in today’s scriptures. In the first reading, Moses ratifies the covenant with the Lord by taking the blood of newly slaughtered bulls, splashing half of it on the altar and sprinkling the other half on the people. The Letter to the Hebrews says Christ, the new Moses, “entered once for all into the [heavenly] sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood.... For this reason he is mediator of a new covenant.” So to drink from the chalice gives clearer expression to this new and eternal covenant, ratified in the Blood of the Lord.

Many Catholics feel squeamish about drinking from a common cup. Of course, if you sit up front, you drink first. Some cannot tolerate alcohol, and the Church permits a different grape product for them, as we may use a low-gluten product for those who should not consume ordinary hosts.

Christ loved us enough to die for us, and he left us his Body and Blood as symbols of his covenant with us. To eat his Body and drink his Blood is to receive the full sign of all the nourishment we need to gladden our way toward the banquet of heaven.