

Practices During the Holy Eucharist

*Practices of the Baptized Person
During the Celebration
of the Holy Eucharist*



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The Eucharist

We begin with recalling what the Eucharist is about. Evelyn Underhill is as good as any in making the point.

“For the fully Christian life is a Eucharistic life: that is, a natural life conformed to the pattern of Jesus, given in its wholeness to God, laid on His altar as a sacrifice of love, and consecrated, transformed by His inpouring life, to be used to give life and food to other souls.”

and

“You are the Body of Christ ... That is to say, in you and through you the method and work of the Incarnation must go forward. You are meant to incarnate in your lives the theme of your adoration. You are to be taken, consecrated, broken, and made a means of grace; vehicles of the Eternal Charity.”

The Holy Eucharist is our participation in the life of God, the Blessed Trinity. In the Eucharist we are joined “with Angels and Archangels and the whole company of heaven.” We are transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

This booklet is on the practices of the baptized person during the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Some will find themselves using all the practices

Some Common Practices

Bowing

The simple bow is a slight bending of the head and shoulders. This is a rather common act of reverence in Episcopal parishes. This bow is often made:

- When the cross passes in procession
- At the mention of the name Jesus
- At the same times when a solemn bow might be appropriate.

There are times when those serving at the altar will make a solemn bow and those in the congregation a simple bow or even no bow.

The solemn bow is a movement of bending from the waist as a sign of reverence. Incline the head and shoulders so it would be possible to touch the knees if one reached out. The solemn bow is another way of showing profound reverence.

The solemn bow may be used at these times:

- To the altar. Usually when entering or leaving a pew or crossing an aisle. This is an act of reverence toward the focal point for the Eucharistic community. The bow is toward the altar, the place of Eucharistic celebration. It is not directed at the cross or any icon behind the altar. You may also do a simple bow
- At the “*Et Incarnatus*” in the Nicene Creed. Bow at “*by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.*” This is in reverence of the Incarnation of our Lord, God’s loving act of sharing life with us. The

Creed of Saint Athanasius expresses it this way - *One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God*

- At *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Power and Might* in the Sanctus
- When the priest and altar party bow during the Great Thanksgiving

In some parishes the solemn bow is also used in reverence of one another. On occasions when incense is used -- when the thurifer censes the people (which is itself a reverencing of the People of God) there is usually an exchange of bows. In some parishes the solemn bow is used between the altar party and the congregation at the beginning and end of the Eucharist.

Genuflecting (*bending the knee*)

There is a tradition in some parishes, and by some people, of **genuflecting** to honor the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. A solemn bow is an alternative used in other places. A genuflection is an action started from a standing position in which a person moves his or her right foot back a step, drops the right knee briefly to the floor, and then stands upright again. Some hold onto the pew or chair when lowering themselves.

People may genuflect in churches where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a tabernacle or ambry in the sanctuary. That is normally indicated by a candle that is always left burning. Some people also genuflect after the bread and wine have been consecrated and they are going forward to receive communion.

Half-hearted genuflections look like curtseys and lack the dignity of a full genuflection. If a person is not able to do full genuflection (and some may not be able to do this) it's best to substitute a solemn bow for a genuflection.

The Sign of the Cross

The sign of the cross is always related to our baptism. The practice of tracing a cross on a person's forehead when they are baptized is seen in the baptismal rite. *"You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever."*

Whenever we use some form of the sign of the cross it is a way a recalling our baptism; who and whose we are. There also may be secondary meanings attached to its use at various points in the liturgy.

"Sanctify us also..." Each Eucharistic Prayer includes a prayer for the blessing of the elements of bread and wine. For example, *"Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son."* There is also an associated petition to sanctify those who will be receiving, *"Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace."* Just as the bread and wine have a sign of the cross applied to them; many have developed the practice of signing themselves at the associated petition.

At the blessing at the end of the Eucharist or during an absolution after the confession - This is the practice of an acted prayer in relationship to the priest's action of making the sign over the people. It is our acceptance of blessing or forgiveness, a restoration to the baptismal unity with God, others and ourselves.

At the beginning of the liturgy - The sign is made at the opening acclamation. This is a way of entering into the mystery by which God reconstitutes the Church as the Body of Christ.

At the reading of the Holy Gospel - A "blessing of the senses" as a small cross is traced on the forehead, mouth and heart. Some people picked up the practice by watching the deacon do it before reading/singing the Gospel. It is about opening ourselves, our mind, speech and heart to the Good News.

Just before having the bread or cup placed in your hands This is an act of reverence associate with receiving the sacrament.

When using Holy Water - Some dip their hand into the holy water when entering or leaving the church. They then sign themselves with the cross in reverence of their baptism and their baptismal vocation. Thomas Merton described our vocation in this way: *"Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny-to work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls 'working out salvation' is a labor which requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears."*

Some also use the sign of the cross at the end of the *Gloria*, at the end of the Nicene Creed (others only use the sign of the cross at the end of the Apostles Creed because of that creed's association with Baptisms), when the departed are prayed for, and when the bread and wine are elevated.

Stillness & Silence

Silence is about claiming a place in which we can be restored to our own wholeness. St. Augustine prayed *"Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee."* Developing a capacity for silence and stillness, in all places and times, is a standard method in the spiritual tradition of Christianity and other faiths. As with the rest of the Eucharist, what we do in the Liturgy is a rehearsal for, and a participation in life in God's kingdom; it is dramatically engaging the fullness of life. Silence and stillness is another opportunity for fullness - a way to become more receptive to the word that God may have for us today. As we have brief times of silence in the Eucharist, so we may create such times in our daily life.

Benedictine spirituality forms one of the major root systems for the Episcopal Church's spirituality. *The Book of Common Prayer* is largely based on Benedictine assumptions about spirituality. Understanding something of that tradition is a way to better understand the depth of our own tradition. Listening is an important theme. In *The Path of Life*, Cyprian Smith writes *"The Rule of Saint Benedict opens with the word ausculata - listen. ...The whole spiritual life... is a process of listening to God, 'inclining the ear of the heart', as the Rule says. This image of the inward ear, the ear of the*

heart, shows us that our listening is not merely an intellectual or rational activity; it is intuitive, springing from the very core of our being, where we are most open to God, most receptive to the word he speaks. We have to be very quiet and still within ourselves, very alert and attentive, if that word is to resonate properly in our innermost depths."

Depending on the practice of each parish, significant times of silence may occur at the beginning of the Eucharist, after readings, after the sermon, during the receiving of Communion. There may be a brief pause before the confession or the praying of a collect. *The Book of Common Prayer* requires a silence at the Breaking of the Bread (usually brief, but distinct).

All times of stillness and silence invite us to be attentive to the presence of God. This is not a time to fuss, to find the next hymn or to look through the bulletin. Refrain from rustling papers, turning of pages, or whispering to others. Silence is the time to be in presence of God.

Receiving Communion

"The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven" - The tradition of receiving the bread is to place the right hand over the left (the other way around is also fine). The bread is then placed in the palm of the right hand. The person receiving then raises his or her hands to the mouth and reverently consumes the bread. Before consuming the bread the person says "Amen" in response to the words of administration: "The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven." It is also permissible to receive the bread directly on the tongue. Indicate that preference by tipping the head back slightly and extending the tongue.

"The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation" - When receiving the cup, take hold of the base of the chalice and guide it to the lips. The tradition is to say "Amen" in response to the words of administration. Some find it easier to say this "amen" after they have consumed the wine. There is also permission to receive by intinction (see below).

Other Related Practices

What if you cannot receive the bread or the wine for some reason of health, alcoholism, etc.? The Church's tradition is that in receiving either the bread or the wine, the person receiving fully receives Christ. Simply cross the arms over the chest or give a slight shake of the head.

The practice of saying "Amen" in response to the words of administration has been restored in our current Prayer Book. This is an act of faith; the saying of "So be it!" St. Cyprian said *"Remember that it is not idly that you say 'Amen.' You are praying that you receive the Body of Christ ...You answer 'Amen', that is "It is true!" Thus keep in your heart what you profess with your lips."*

Intinction is the practice of the bread being dipped into the wine and then consumed. The practice is primarily a 19th century development based on spiritual confusion, some false assumptions about hygiene, and frequently bigotry toward the poor, other races and gay and lesbians.

A preferable practice is to receive only the bread; leaving the rail before the cup is administered or giving a slight shake of the head as the minister of communion approaches.

In dioceses where it is a permitted practice the best way is, for reasons of both hygiene and spirituality, is to leave the bread (the host) in the palm of the hand; this signals the minister of communion about your intentions; the priest or chalice-bearer can then take the host from your fingers, dip it slightly into the wine and place it on the tongue. Intinction should never be used with baked bread as it may leave crumbs in the chalice, something that interferes with the dignity and beauty of the experience of the common cup.

Standing and Kneeling

Stand or kneel during the Great Thanksgiving and when receiving communion?

Thoughts on the Piety of Each Practice

Kneeling

- It is what many older Episcopalians grew up with and are comfortable with.
- It can be seen to emphasize a sense of awe and wonder in the presence of God.
- It may be an expression of a generally penitential orientation.

Standing

- It is the older tradition and now the more common tradition in parishes
- It may increase a sense of the Eucharist as being an act of the community rather than a collection of individuals; it helps us be aware of others
- Some believe it may place more emphasis on human dignity and worth.

In deciding what posture you want to take you might consider the following:

- Which posture best expresses your piety, the way you want to engage Our Lord in the Eucharist?
- Which best expresses your values and beliefs?
- Which posture best expresses how you want to do this now? You may decide to change postures from time to time to express current feelings, to experiment with your spiritual practices, or to fit the tone of Rite I (kneeling) or Rite II (standing).

Many older members of the church grew up kneeling for both what we referred to as “the consecration prayer” and as we received communion. With the liturgical changes that have influenced worship in all Christian communities since the late 1940’s, we have experienced some changes in those practices. The Episcopal Church’s approach has been one of making room for the changes while allowing most people to continue familiar practices. So, we have a Prayer Book with both “contemporary” and “traditional” language for prayer and we may kneel or stand for the Great Thanksgiving and receiving communion.

In the Episcopal Church today the most common posture for prayer and receiving communion is standing, with kneeling being the preference in a number of parishes.

Those who have a difficult time kneeling or standing should feel free to sit for the Great Thanksgiving, and if needed, allow the ministers of the altar to bring communion to them in the pew.

All these practices are ways to bring our whole self to the Eucharist. They allow us to pray with our bodies as well as our lips.

In Christian spirituality, worship and prayer are not an activity just of the head or mind, but of the whole person. This is theologically grounded in the Incarnation. Traditional spiritual direction gives a lot of attention to helping gain some balance in the rhythm of sleeping, work, recreation, eating, and so on. It is also part of our affirmation of the goodness of the world God has created. Those things in life that give us pleasure are fundamentally good. Fun, our bodies, material things, and good food are all accepted as part of living a full life.

It's somewhat like dancing. It's not dancing if what we are doing is reading a book about dancing, or having a discussion about dancing, or even watching others dance. We are dancing when we give ourselves to the action, when our bodies are in motion. As in dancing, when we make a mistake in our practices during Mass, we need to just rejoin the action. Few things will ruin the dance more than obsessing about it when we miss a step.

Communion Devotions

These are practices used by some people.

Fasting Communion

Some people follow the tradition of fasting before communion. The Blessed Sacrament is then the first food of the day.

Before Communion

After entering the church sit or kneel and become still outwardly and inwardly. *God our Father, whose Son our Lord Jesus Christ in a wonderful Sacrament has left us a memorial of his passion: Grant us so to venerate the sacred mysteries of his Body and Blood, that we may ever perceive within ourselves the fruit of his redemption; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

At the Offertory

As the bread and wine are laid upon the altar silently say, *"It is you who lie upon the altar; it is you, your very life, within the cup."* (Augustine of Hippo)

After Receiving Communion

Blessed, praised, worshipped and adored be Jesus Christ on his throne of glory, in heaven, in the most holy Sacrament of the altar, and in the hearts of his faithful people (and may the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.) Amen.