

What should I do in the time after I have received Jesus in Holy Communion?

This is a precious time we should not waste. The real presence of Our Lord remains until our body digests the consecrated host – probably less than a quarter of an hour. St Teresa of Avila, who often had a colourful turn of phrase, spoke somewhere of “bargaining” with Our Lord because “He pays well for his lodging.” So, therefore,

- Really thank Jesus for wanting to come and dwell within us.
- Try to concentrate on his presence with us and within us.
- Call on him to help us be more like him. For example, we might ask him to make us more generous, less lazy, stronger in the face of certain temptations, more thoughtful of others and less concerned about ourselves, more cheerful, less proud and short-tempered, etc.
- Pray for the needs of other people, such as those in our family, our friends, persons who are suffering or in need, the Pope, or any others who may come to mind.
- Use some prayers we might find in books or we have learned by heart to show our love for Jesus, to adore him and to thank him.
- Enjoy his good company and remember how he is able to make us good and strong Christians, even when we might not feel very strong ourselves.
- Make some good resolution or at least tell him we are ready to try harder to live by his commandments and by the good ideas he brings to our mind and heart.

God knows what we need

We can be sure that God did not give us the possibility of sacramental Communion simply to mystify us. Rather, he thought of our needs and then answered them in a really marvellous and loving way. God knew that we would find his call to live as Christians attractive but a real challenge, and that the eternal reward he promised might seem too distant to us at times.

He knew we would need someone here and now to keep us company along the way, someone whom we could love with our heart, someone who could keep our hopes high. He knew we needed a role model that was not, at the same time, remote or unsympathetic to our own limitations. He knew we needed a physician, a medicine, and a kind of food that would renew us in the face of tiredness or failure. So he gave us his Son, Jesus Christ himself, under the appearance of the common but significant forms of food and drink.

“Stay with us”, said the two tired disciples to the new friend they had met along the way to Emmaus. (cf Lk 24:13-35) It was only while he sat at the table with them and broke the bread to share with them that they recognised that

this friend was Jesus. It was Jesus, risen from the dead, and perhaps with a new youthful appearance about him. We, too, recognise Jesus alive and risen when the host is broken and raised up in Mass, just before Holy Communion: “This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper.” Happy indeed are those who are called to receive him in Communion.

We go up and embrace him as our inspiring friend, our saviour and our role model. Our embrace is a strong one – in fact it is consuming – yet not so as to crush him or make him simply a part of ourselves. Instead we are united to him in the most intimate possible way: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him.” (Jn 6:56) We become, so to speak, “other Christs” and are enabled to live as true Christians and to bring Christ into the lives of others.

Pope John Paul II expressed his desire that all Catholics who might have lost the proper sense of what the Eucharist really is could regain it in the Year of the Eucharist. “I would like to rekindle this Eucharistic ‘amazement’”, he wrote. “To contemplate the face of Christ, and to contemplate it with Mary, is the ‘program’

which I have set before the Church at the dawn of the new millennium, summoning her to put out into the deep on the sea of history with the enthusiasm of the new evangelisation.” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 6)

The Lord of the Rings and all that

Fans of *The Lord of the Rings* may remember that both in the book and in the film there is a moment when Frodo and Sam are tired, discouraged, frightened and hungry. All they can find to relieve their hunger is the lembas bread given to them by the elves. It was not the kind of food the body fancied but it had remarkable properties. As the book explains, “It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure and master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind.”

The author of the book, J.R.R. Tolkien, was a devout Catholic. He once said that he did not write his major work as a strict analogy with Christian belief and faith, but elsewhere he admitted that “*The Lord of the Rings* is, of course, a fundamentally religious and Catholic work”. (*Letter 142*) So, it is likely that the lembas bread has some connection with his own experience as a regular communicant at Mass. Just how strongly he felt about the Eucharist comes out in a letter to his son: “Out of the darkness of my life so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament... There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon the earth...which every man’s heart desires.” (*Letter 53*)

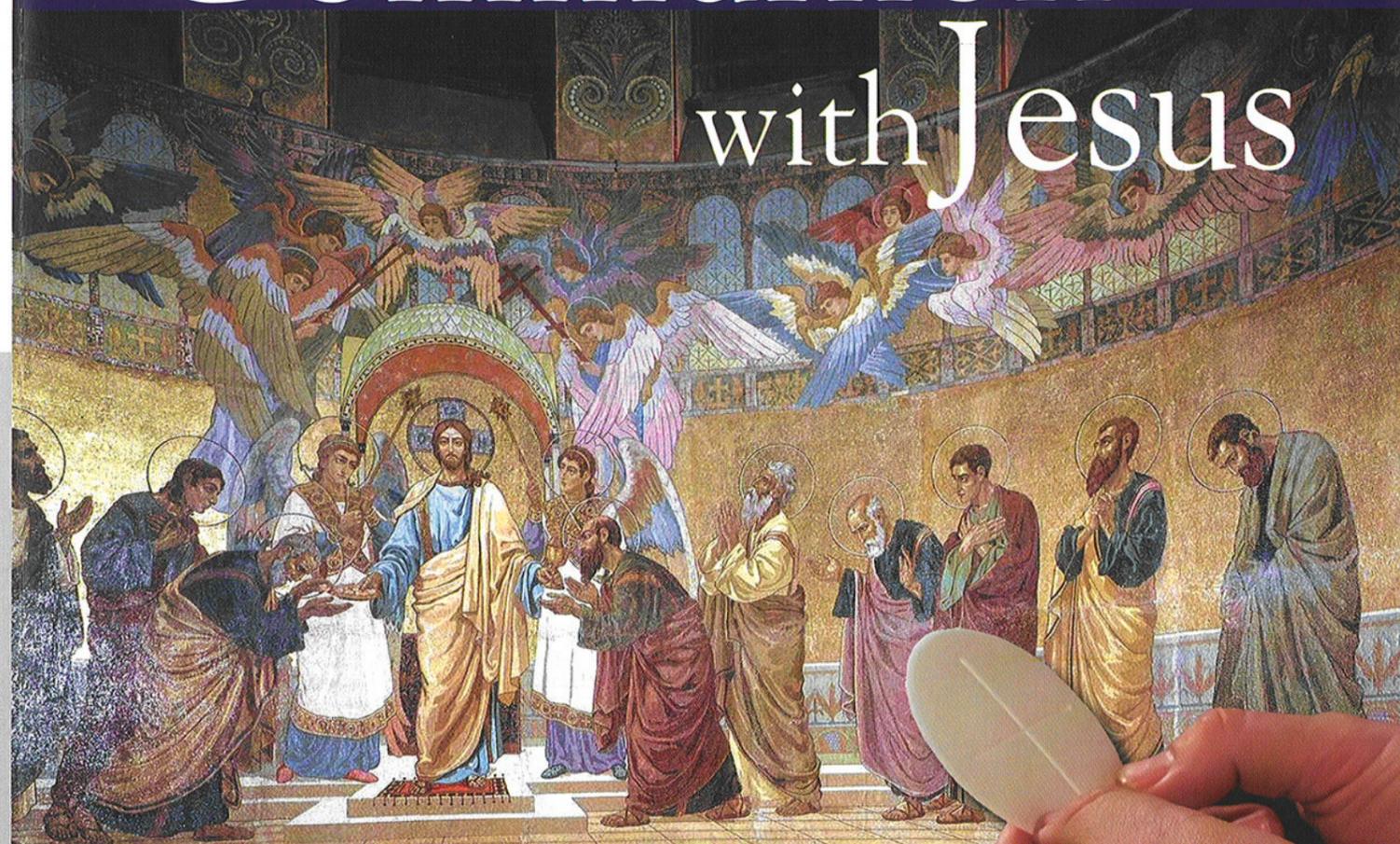
Questions for discussion

1. In Holy Communion we receive the most important person, Jesus Christ himself. What are some ways we would prepare ourselves to receive another person who is important to us? How can we apply this way of acting in preparing ourselves for Holy Communion?
2. The writer of this article makes the point that people today are not as concerned about their spiritual life as about their worldly life. Do you think this is the case and, if so, what can we do to make our lives more “prayer friendly”?
3. What are some ways you have personally found helpful to prepare to receive Our Lord in Holy Communion or to give thanks afterwards?
4. The Eucharist is sometimes called the “Blessed Sacrament”. Why do you think it is called “blessed”?

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Communion with Jesus



How are you performing?

Just think how often you see endurance athletes these days, like those who compete in the Tour de France, taking a deep drink from a bottle of mineral water with salts in a race against opponents or against time. In fact, it is not only athletes in demanding competition who make sure they don't dehydrate. Even the everyday student or employee is often seen with a bottle of water close at hand.

We have become much more health and performance conscious in recent times, at least as far as the body is concerned. Less attention seems to be shown when it comes to our spiritual side. It is less common to come across people showing concern over how they are performing as Christians, or simply as good, honest persons. Clearly I am generalising here, but there are grounds for wonder over this kind of imbalance.

Why is it that one can find entire families who identify with the Catholic "thing" but regularly miss out on Sunday Mass? And how is it that even a good number of those who do make it to Mass more or less regularly seem not to understand why they are there? And how is it that many receive Communion regularly of a Sunday, but don't seem to distinguish themselves in any way from those who don't?

Food for high aspirations

When John Paul II decided to declare a Year of the Eucharist, many persons in the Church may have wondered what this was all about. Yet anyone who has gone deeper into the Church's teaching on the greatness of this sacrament and its relation to 'performing' as a Christian knows there are good reasons for his decision.

"The Church draws her life from the Eucharist", Pope John Paul said. Even Catholics might ask in what sense this is true, because they feel quite capable of living without it. They might feel, on the contrary, they could hardly live without watching their favourite TV program, catching a game of footy on the weekend, or paying a visit to the pub on Friday afternoon after work.

What we have to do is ask what level of life the Pope was talking about. Certainly, the body can live without the Eucharist because it has other more nourishing and appetising foods within reach. And the brain and senses can be exercised or entertained in any number of ingenious ways open to us today. But this is life as it will one day end. The Eucharist is food for

eternal life and it is nothing short of being the beginning of an everlasting love affair with God.

What Holy Communion is all about

As many know, the Eucharist is the original name for what we commonly call "the Mass." However, it also refers to the wafers of bread, called hosts – consecrated during a Mass – that have become the Body and Blood of Christ. Therefore, the word Eucharist is also used to speak of the enduring presence of Jesus under the appearance of consecrated hosts kept in the tabernacles (decorative safes) of so many Catholic churches throughout the world.

The word "Communion", on the other hand, refers to the act of receiving and consuming the sacred host within Mass (or possibly, on rarer occasions, outside of Mass). It is a communion – or especially intimate union – with Jesus himself.

We cannot underestimate the greatness of what we receive on these occasions. Boston's Archbishop Sean O'Malley tells how "many years ago, I met someone who had fled from a communist country, leaving behind their family, friends and a rather prestigious post. When I asked why, he said it was because he wanted to receive Holy Communion and that was increasingly more difficult for him to do in his own country."

This anecdote about a communist country where religion was not really tolerated, reminded me of a story a friend of mine once told me about his university days. He tried to argue with another student with communist leanings about the importance of living according to certain good principles. His acquaintance argued back and said something like: "That's easy for you to do. You believe that you receive your God."

Here lies the key to people's different attitudes to Communion and how they 'perform' in daily life as a consequence. It is a matter of sincere faith. If we really understand that we are receiving our God, and that God brings with him a key that opens the door to eternal life and happiness, then we value Holy Communion. We do not want to miss out and we want to receive it in such a way that it does us the greatest possible good. We want to live up to what we receive.

"I have seen hardened sinners completely change the direction of their lives", wrote Archbishop O'Malley, "because of a deep



spiritual hunger for the Eucharist. It is the most intimate union we can have with Christ in this life. It is a clear sign of his love for and his desire to give himself to us."

So why are some indifferent?

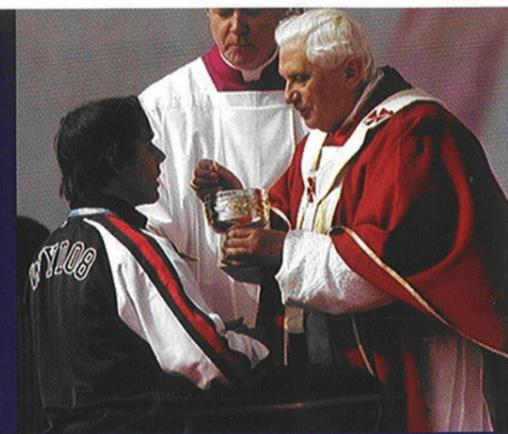
So what seems to be the problem with all those Catholics who decide they don't need to go to Mass or, once there, seem rather indifferent about it all?

Well, to be honest, we priests are partly to blame. All too seldom do we actually preach about the Mass or Communion and about what the Church teaches about it. Even our way of acting can at times be a real put off and make it look like nothing really important is happening. What a difference watching a Pope or any priest, however obscure, celebrate Mass with true reverence and love for the Eucharist! Sometimes we priests seem to rush through the Mass and to be more concerned about the yearly parish fete and the parish finances than about the priestly role we are meant to fulfil.

The good Archbishop quoted above went on to give another answer to the problem. "We lose sight of how great a treasure the Eucharist is [because] we become so surfeited with material things, so distracted by our worries, our fears or our ambitions that we no longer feel that longing for union with God. In Mary's Canticle we affirm

How should I go up to receive Communion?

- Trying to focus on the Communion I am about to receive, asking Our Lord to help me receive him well, with faith, hope and love.
- Making some sign of my faith and reverence (for example, a simple bow or a genuflection on one knee) just before I receive Our Lord.
- If I receive the host on the tongue, I make it easy for the priest or minister to place the host upon it, opening the mouth sufficiently and extending the tongue slightly over the lower lip.
- If I receive the host on the hand, I place my right hand beneath my left to make a "throne" for Christ. Once I have been given the host I take it up straight away using the index finger and thumb of my right hand to place the host in my mouth and swallow it.
- Once I return to my seat, I continue my thanksgiving.



our belief that our God 'will fill the hungry with good things,' while those surfeited with material goods 'will be sent away empty-handed.'" (cf Lk 1:53)

I agree that getting absorbed by short-term comforts and ever increasing technological novelties is a big factor in our not hungering for God. It might not even be too far fetched to say that we are in the grip of collective obsessive-compulsive behaviour: buy, buy, buy; sell, sell, sell. We seem to be thinking that in a continuous flow of purchases, comforts or novel experiences, we will find happiness. Even for those who have little, there is the conviction that those who have lots are on to the real thing – genuine, unadulterated happiness. Yet time and again that thinking is proved false and dissatisfaction quickly follows.

We are made for far greater things than video games and iPods. We are destined for God. St Augustine said it well and his words are therefore often quoted: "The thought of you stirs us so deeply that we cannot be content unless we praise you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you." (*Confessions* 1, 1) Once we realise that God is calling us to holiness and therefore to struggle against sin in our lives, once we understand that our eternal happiness depends upon the grace of God, then the Eucharist becomes the indispensable remedy, the treasured nourishment that overcomes our keenly felt weakness.

St Francis de Sales on frequent Communion

If worldly people ask you why you receive Communion so often, tell them that it is to learn to love God, be purified from your imperfections, delivered from misery, comforted in affliction, and supported in weakness. Tell them that two classes of people should communicate frequently: the perfect, because being well disposed they would be very much to blame if they did not approach the source and fountain of perfection, and the imperfect, so that they rightly strive for perfection; the strong lest they become weak, and the weak that they may become strong; the sick that they may be restored to health, and the healthy lest they fall sick... Tell them that you receive the Blessed Sacrament often so as to learn how to receive it well, for we hardly do an action well which we do not practise often. (*Introduction to the Devout Life*)

Getting real about Communion

Recently, a religion instructor was questioning a group of Catholic high school students about their understanding of the Church. When the topic got on to the current shortage of priests, the teacher asked why they were needed. A few volunteered more or less reasonable answers. Then came a response that, though somehow correct, shocked him: "To give us the bread."

He realised then that for many young – and

probably not so young – persons, queuing up for Holy Communion was just a ceremony where you went up and received "the bread". Of these persons some surely would at least consider this bread as a sign or symbol of Jesus. But that is far short of what the Church believes.

Until the sixteenth century, there was no large body of people in the whole Christian world who held that Communion was just holy bread or a sign of Jesus. Instead, since the earliest centuries – it is well documented in numerous writings of those times – the faith of Christians held that receiving the consecrated hosts was receiving Christ himself. In the words of the Council of Trent (1542-65), which had to oppose this later "symbolic" interpretation of such Protestant leaders as Calvin and Zwingli, the hosts were "the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ." After all, didn't Jesus himself say: "Take and eat, this is my body"? (Mt 26:26)

Granted, this is pretty mind-boggling stuff. But so is the origin of the whole universe that science itself largely agrees originated in a dimensionless point. This universe, which is continuously expanding at an accelerating rate, contains some 120 million galaxies, each galaxy having on average 200 million stars! In other words, we are dealing with an all-powerful Creator who "has the whole world in his hands." As Jesus himself said, "With men, this is impossible, but with God, all things are possible." (Mt 19:26)

How should I prepare for Holy Communion?

- By looking forward to it.
- By confessing beforehand any serious sins I may be aware of that I have not already confessed. (cf 1 Cor 11:27-32; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1385).
- By fasting for at least one hour before receiving Holy Communion – meaning no food or drink except water or medicines.
- By behaving respectfully in church – not chatting, being neatly dressed (as when I am supposed to meet a special guest), not distracting myself or others, paying attention to the different parts of the Mass.

