

The Communion Rite: TAKE and eat

Last week I wrote about the reintroduction in 1963 of the practice of allowing all to receive communion from the cup as a way to have our manner of receiving communion correspond more faithfully to Jesus invitation-command to *“Take and eat, take and drink.”* This week we will look at another way of receiving communion that has been reintroduced since Vatican II: communion in the hand. From the earliest days of the Church both ways of receiving the communion bread, the sacramental Body of Christ, have been practiced, on the tongue and in the hand. St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who lived in the mid 4th Century, wrote of how communion in the hand should be done: *“When you approach, take care not to do so with your hand stretched out and your fingers open or apart, but rather place your left hand as a throne beneath your right, as befits one who is about to receive the King. Then receive him, taking care that nothing is lost.”* The concern for care and reverence toward the Eucharist Cyril shows here eventually led to the abandonment of the practice of lay people receiving communion in the hand in later centuries. Even priests, when receiving communion from another priest, were not allowed to take communion in the hand. In 1969 bishops from about 13 different English speaking countries requested permission from Pope Paul VI to reintroduce the practice of allowing those who wished to receive communion in the hand. One of the main reasons for the bishops’ request was related to the renewed appreciation of the Mass as a communal meal, as well as a prayer of sacrificial offering. Over the entire history of the Mass both its “sacrificial” and “meal” aspects have made up our Catholic understanding of the Mass, with one aspect emphasized more at some times, and the other at other times. Again, the request for permission to receive communion in the hand came with the renewed appreciation of the Mass as a meal in the teachings of Vatican II. Both ways of receiving communion, in the hand and on the tongue, are equally allowed and acceptable, and no one is ever to be required to receive one way or the other. Each person receiving communion is free to choose which way they will receive. In an instruction on the manner of receiving communion, whether in the hand or on the tongue, the Church stresses that whichever option is used *must increase in those receiving communion a consciousness of the dignity of the members of Christ's Mystical Body, into which they are incorporated by baptism and by the grace of the Eucharist. It must also increase their faith in the sublime reality of the Lord's body and blood, which they touch with their hands or receive on their tongue. Their attitude of reverence must always measure up to what they are doing.*

Please let us know what else about our faith tradition you'd like to find out more about. Contact our Council for Catechesis at tkautza@saintmaryhc.org.