

The Communion Procession

When we come forward to receive Holy Communion at the Eucharist, we are not lining up as isolated individuals, couples, families or groups to be nourished and sustained for our Christian lives. We come forward together as the Body of Christ to receive the Body of Christ. We receive the Body of Christ so that we may be more truly together the Body of Christ in the world. As St Augustine of Hippo reminded us, at the Eucharist we receive what we are, and we become what we receive: ‘You reply “Amen” to that which you are, and by your reply you consent. For you hear “the Body of Christ” and you reply “Amen”. Be a member of the Body of Christ so that your “Amen” may be true.’

One Bread One Body 94

The Communion procession expresses the humble patience of the poor moving forward to be fed, the alert expectancy of God’s people sharing the Paschal meal in readiness for their journey, the joyful confidence of God’s people on the march toward the Promised Land. In England and Wales it is through this action of walking solemnly in procession that the faithful make their sign of reverence in preparation for receiving Communion.

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The Communion Procession is not simply about getting up out of one’s seat, walking to the minister, receiving communion and walking back to one’s seat and sitting down again.

The procession is

- a procession accompanied by song which is to express unity in spirit by means unity in song and to show joy of heart (cf. GIRM 86)
- a communal action and not simply a private, individual action (cf. GIRM 86, OBOB 94)
- not merely action but action as prayer, a visible sign of reverence (cf. CTM, 210)

The Church makes quite some demands of this procession. They are not always going to be easy for particular communities of the Church to fulfil. One common reason for this in England and Wales is that many of our church buildings were designed before the renewal of the Liturgy over the past 100 years. A good number of them were designed before the encouragement to frequent communion by Saint Pope Pius X, and their design did not envisage the whole congregation coming forward to receive Holy Communion. Still more were designed before the more

recent encouragement to the ministering of Holy Communion under both kinds, and the additional number of ministers and communion stations that this will usually require.

Yet if the Communion Procession, and our reception of Holy Communion itself is to be carried out in a worthy fashion we need to overcome these common difficulties. We need to achieve a sense of order and rhythm in the procession, so that it can signify reverence and a communitarian corporate quality in what we do.

Quite how we do this will vary from parish to parish, according to the arrangement of the church, and the resources of the community, for example the number of members of the community who are willing to give of their time and energies to train for service as Commissioned ministers of Holy Communion.

It is not uncommon for people to wish to come forward in their own time to receive communion. Sometimes one sees those who want to be first, or want to be last. Yet this is a time when, as already noted the Church urges us to an action together. Of course if someone wants to be first or last, one cannot stop them – and they can easily enough work out where they wish to sit. At least their private devotional practice will have been more satisfactorily incorporated into the parish liturgical practice.

A good general principle to note when Holy Communion is being distributed under both kinds, is that normally twice there will be two ministers distributing the Precious Blood to every one distributing the Body of the Lord.

This brief paper considers just three basic arrangements and offers some suggestions as to how things might be managed. Still more ideas can be found in Gabe Huck's *The Communion Rite at Sunday Mass*. Chicago, Liturgical Training Publications, 1989.

In almost all cases the use of ushers can assist the good order of the procession, and particularly make sure that visitors to the church are helped to fit into the host parish's regular practice

1. A church with only a single, centre, aisle

In such churches the centre aisle is often so narrow that the procession can only be one deep without blocking the aisle.

It would be preferable for all those seated on one side of the church to come forward row by row, beginning either from the front or from the back. Only when all those seated on the one side have

received Holy Communion should those on the other side begin to come forward, beginning either from the front or the back.

In order to assist the orderly ministering of Holy Communion under both kinds it may be better for the priest ministering the Body of the Lord to stand to one side of the aisle, and the two ministers of the Precious Blood to stand to the other.

Such a single aisle arrangement is most common in smaller churches, in which case three ministers for the distribution of Holy Communion is likely to be enough. If the size of the congregation warrants it, then two ministers of the Body of the Lord stand to one side and three or four ministers of the Precious Blood to the other.

2. A church with a centre aisle and two side aisles

If the centre aisle is narrow then, as in the example above, it is often preferable for all those sitting on one side of the church to come forward before those sitting on the other side. If there is a second row of seats on one or either of the side aisles the people seated in them should come out row by row with those sitting in the corresponding block of seats on the centre aisle. All should then return to their seats by the side aisle.

If the assembly is coming forward first one side and then the other, the ministers of Holy Communion are perhaps best arranged as in example 1.

However it may be possible to invite first those in a row on the one side of the centre aisle followed by those on the other side. The ushers will keep the same pattern going until all have come forward.

In this case the ministers of the Body of the Lord should stand in the centre and ministers of the Precious Blood to both sides.

This would also be the case where the centre aisle is wide enough for people to come into the centre aisle from both sets of benches at the same time.

There will be particular need for ushers where access to benches from the side aisle is obstructed by columns. In this case it will be most helpful to start the Communion Procession from the back of the Church so that those returning to such benches can do that by walking down the side aisle to the back and then returning to their bench down the centre aisle, but without having to cross over those still going forward to receive Holy Communion.

- 3. A Church with seating arranged on three sides of the sanctuary**
Such an arrangement of seating often presents the greatest challenges with regard to the good order of the Communion Procession. A few suggested arrangements from Gabe Huck's book are provided below. They can of course be adapted to meet particular circumstances.