

# Believe Celebrate Live THE EUCHARIST

## Communion

### The Lord's Prayer

The Lord's Prayer is sung or said almost every time the Church gathers for prayer. Even when Communion is taken to the sick, the brief prayers accompanying the rite always include the Lord's Prayer. When it is prayed at every Mass, it marks the beginning of the Communion rite.

The Lord's Prayer is a prayer for the coming of the kingdom, an "Advent" prayer, as it were. But it is also a community prayer for reconciliation and forgiveness. When Jesus taught us to pray, he taught us to pray together: "we," not "I." He taught us to look, as a community, to the coming of the kingdom, without neglecting to ask for "our daily bread." And he taught us to seek forgiveness, not only from God but from each other: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." For St. Augustine, these words of forgiveness had special importance when the prayer was said at Mass: "As a result of these words we approach the altar with clean faces; with clean faces we share in the body and blood of Christ" (quoted in Cabié, *The Eucharist*, p. 109).

### Sign of Peace

The sign of peace "may have generated more opposition and controversy than any of the changes in the liturgy after the Second Vatican Council" (Champlin, *The Mystery and Meaning of the Mass*, p. 104). Shaking hands in church? Yet it is an ancient practice, vouched for by none other than St. Paul himself, who told the Romans to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16). Tertullian called the kiss of peace "a seal set upon the prayer" (quoted in Cabié, p. 114).

In the early church, the peace was exchanged before the gifts procession, in remembrance of Christ's



words: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23–24, *NRSV*). In some current rites—for example, that celebrated in Zaire—it still

takes place at that moment. But in our celebration of the Roman rite, as early as the time of St. Augustine this sign had been moved to follow the Lord's Prayer, and it flows naturally out of the plea for reconciliation and peace at the end of the Our Father.

The peace is a ritual moment, not "a greeting or a welcome, but rather a sign and vehicle of reconciliation" (Champlin, p. 106). As we exchange the sign of peace with those around us, we come face to face with Christ's presence in the assembly of which we are a part, a presence that at times can be harder to grasp than his presence under the signs of a sacrament in bread and wine.

It is quite wonderful that the Church provides no specific words and no specific sign for this moment. This rite is celebrated by the faithful, and every community is free to pray this moment of reconciliation in its own way.

### The Breaking of the Bread

"Christ's gesture of breaking bread at the Last Supper . . . gave the entire Eucharistic Action its name in apostolic times" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal [GIRM] #83*). The breaking of bread was central to St. Paul's understanding of the church itself: "Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf"

(1 Corinthians 10:17). As the bread is broken, we pray a litany: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world: have mercy on us. . . . Grant us peace.” This litany has a different function from the Kyrie with which the Mass began, and that it echoes. As Msgr. Champlin observes, “The word ‘mercy’ means more than our customary English ‘forgiveness’ or ‘compassion.’”

It would be a mistake to hear this as a plea to a just judge, a plea not to be punished. Rather, in asking Jesus the Lamb to “have mercy on us,” we are imploring “all of God’s blessings” (Champlin, pp. 107–108).

The bread is broken, the wine is poured. The priest takes the broken host and raises it, with the chalice, for all to see. Then he invites the people to Communion in words that echo the litany just prayed and the words of the angel to St. John: “Happy are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). At this moment, as we wait to come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are also, in a sense, waiting for the culmination of all things, the marriage supper of the Lamb.

### **Communion Procession**

From the Gospels, we know that the Last Supper was anything but a passive event. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples; they prayed together as he broke



the bread; and when he foretold his betrayal, “they began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, ‘Surely it is not I?’” (Mark 14:19).

For us, too, Communion is a moment of decision and action, a moment when we let Jesus serve us, when we are challenged to declare our faith in him. Communion is not brought to us where we are;

we do not pass a plate along each row. No, we move, we stand up, we go forward to the altar. We make a choice. We do not receive the Body and Blood of Christ in silence, but with song and with dialogue. “The Body of Christ.” “Amen.” “The Blood of Christ.” “Amen.”

The procession is an expression of community. Even as the Body of Christ is given and received, the procession itself expresses the unity of the gathered assembly. But at the same time, Communion is a private moment, when each Christian individually approaches and, one by one, receives God’s own gift of self. St. Cyril, in his fourth-century instructions to the neophytes of Jerusalem, captures the wonderful mystery and intimacy of this moment: “When you approach, do not come with your hands outstretched or with your fingers open, but make your left hand a throne for the right one, which is to receive the King” (quoted in Champlin, p. 115).

## **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

- What does receiving the Body and Blood of Christ mean in my daily life?
- How has my understanding and experience of this sacrament changed over time?
- Is receiving Communion a private moment? Is it a communal moment? Might it be both?
- As I continue to grow in grace and enrich my spiritual life, how might I deepen my faith in this great sacrament?