Richard E. McCarron

Holy Communion Is an Ecclesial Act

There have been a number of recent developments around Holy Communion at Sunday Mass in dioceses of the United States in connection with the implementation of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) of 2002 and the Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under Both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America approved in 2002. In all of this implementation, we learn again that ritual practices are not neutral; our liturgical practices can both shape us and misshape us. Through our liturgical practices we have developed certain habits over time, and as we all know, old habits, fashioned before or just after Vatican II, are sometimes difficult to break. The vision of the renewed communion rite set out in the GIRM, with its call to full, conscious, and active participation in communion as a liturgical act, means that we are called to cultivate new habits, to act in a new way, so as to become a new people. Embodying these rites, we can become more imbued with a liturgical spirituality and so more deeply transformed by what we do at Sunday Mass.

Becoming One Body, One Spirit

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy advanced a vital reconnection of Holy Communion of the faithful and the liturgical celebration of the Mass, a tie that had been severed since the late Middle Ages. The constitution declared: “That more complete form of participation in the Mass by which the faithful, after the priest’s communion, receive the Lord’s body from the same sacrifice is strongly recommended” (no. 55). This vision and theology inspired the renewal of the communion rite in the Missal of Paul VI. As expressed in the GIRM 1975, the people remain standing during the communion rite, except during the period of silence after communion, when they could sit if that seemed helpful (no. 21). During the priest’s communion the communion song begins and continues through the people’s communion. The purpose of the communion song is “to express outwardly the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to give evidence of joy of heart, and to make the procession to receive Christ’s body more fully an act of the community” (no. 56).

The GIRM 1975 directed that people should “shun any appearance of individualism or division... they should become one body whether by hearing the word of God, or joining in prayers and songs, or above all by offering the sacrifice together and sharing together in the Lord’s table”
(no. 62, emphasis added). When they approach the ministers of communion, they stand before them, make the proper reverence (cf. nos. 244, 245, 246, 247), and receive. Communion under both species was encouraged and, with the publication in 1984 of the U.S. directory *This Holy and Living Sacrifice*, was envisioned at most celebrations. The period of silence after all have received recognizes and gives ritual expression to the need for personal thanksgiving and prayer after the intense act of Holy Communion. The prayer after communion concludes the rite, and its themes often connect the fruits of communion with expectation for the eternal banquet of Heaven.

The revised GIRM published in 2002 echoes the core of its 1975 predecessor. In harmony with GIRM 1975, GIRM 2002 sets out the key ritual goal: “In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people” (no. 95); “they form one body . . . by a common partaking at the Lord’s table” (no. 96). The communion song expresses the union of spirit, joy of heart, and “‘communitarian’ nature of the procession” (no. 86). Many parishes are striving to embody the vision of the GIRM where it speaks of how “a common posture, to be observed by all participants, is a sign of unity,” that common posture “expresses and fosters the intention and spiritual attitude of the participants” (no. 42), and that our unity as one body is “beautifully apparent from gestures and postures observed in common by the faithful” (no. 96).

**Holy Communion: An Ecclesial Act**

The ritual patterns of the communion rite invite us to embrace it once again as an integral part of the celebration of the liturgy and so a communal act. This has several implications. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy is clear about what this entails: liturgical services are not private functions (no. 26), liturgy is the outstanding means by which the faithful express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the nature of the true Church (no. 2); public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is by head and members (no. 7); the very nature of liturgy calls for the “full, conscious, and active participation” by all the faithful (no. 14); and the Church’s sacramental celebrations have a threefold dimension: to make people holy, to build up the Body of Christ, and to give worship to God (no. 59).

All we do as we participate in liturgy is thus an ecclesial act. We act as a corporate assembly not as autonomous individuals deciding what, whether, and when we will join in. When we sing and keep silent prayer, when we respond and listen, we do so as assembly. So it is with the act of coming to Holy Communion. We receive Holy Communion as an ecclesial body. Our reception of Holy Communion is not a private act, as if we step out of our liturgical roles as members of the assembly for this moment.

Our ritual patterns help us to embody this vision. We process, rather than line up as if we were at a sacred ATM with our personal PIN. We, like beggars, stand with open hands, and bow our heads to be mindful of the great gift that we receive from the hand of another. This is not something we can do for ourselves; but, totally open and dependent on God, we are ministered to. We do not take Christ into ourselves, as Augustine once said, but Christ takes us into himself. And that taking us into himself is a radical and inseparable taking of us into his Body, the Church. This underlines the act of Holy Communion as an act of gift: a gift given and received, a gift of relationship and indwelling. St. Thomas Aquinas expressed
this long standing conviction that the ultimate end (the res) of the Eucharist is the unity of the mystical Body of Christ (cf. *Summa Theologiae* 3.q 83.a 9.ad 2). So our communion rites inscribe in us the inseparable link between the vertical (communion with Christ) and the horizontal (the communion with our sisters and brothers).

The late Dominican theologian Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard helps us to plumb the depths of what *communion* as the unity of the mystical Body is. To say that we are bound in Holy Communion recognizes "the fabric of the union of brothers and sisters, of ‘community’ acting in communion." Tillard emphasizes that this communion must not end in personal good feelings, but translates into concrete action for sharing goods, hospitality, service, and mutual forgiveness (see Tillard, 24). To be in communion is not something added or something that follows from our individual commitments: "One cannot be ‘in Christ’ without being part of his body, therefore essentially joined to the other members of the body” (24). Paraphrasing St. Paul in 1 Corinthians, Tillard argues: "One comes to the assembly of the Church of God in order to eat the meal of the Lord in communion with one’s sisters and brothers, not to find a juxtaposition of individual meals" (27). So, too, the value of the communion rite is not the sum of our individual consumption of the elements, but the larger symbolic act of eating and drinking together.

In this connection Tillard draws attention to words from St. John Chrysostom: “We communicate not only by participating and partaking but also by being united” (*Homilies on 1 Cor* 24.16-17 in Tillard, 67). This act of being united is always already and not yet. Each act of Holy Communion builds on the last and anticipates the fullness that is to come. Indeed, the renewed rites offered to us a strong ecclesial understanding of the act of Holy Communion expressed in a new ritual choreography of attitude, gesture, posture, song, and silence.

**Turning Again to the Central Things**

Our ritual act of communion is, then, an event that reveals a covenant relationship forged in the past, our present manifestation of the whole Body of Christ, and a future pledge of full communion in the Heavenly Banquet. It cannot be reduced to a private act of individual reception. The communion rite with its interplay of gesture, text, movement, song, and silence draws us outward from the act of receiving the Body of Christ in sacrament toward one another as members of the Body of Christ; and as members of the Body of Christ, toward our neighbor and our summons to be broken and poured out as a gift for the life of the world.

**Reference**