Of all the beautiful prayers of the Tridentine Mass, my favorite is the one prayed as the priest gave sacramental Communion to each person who received: “Corpus Domini nostri Iesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam. Amen.” It’s simple, warm, and direct. To carry its full meaning, it would have to be said lovingly, without rushing. As he prayed this prayer the priest made a small sign of the cross with the host, reminding the communicant that he or she was joining sacramentally in Christ’s saving death. The communicant, rising from a kneeling position, would make the sign of the cross, accepting a full share in Christ’s sacrifice and proclaiming faith in the resurrection.

If only it had been so!

My memories as communicant and altar server are not filled with the level of devotion that the prayerful act of receiving Communion might properly call forth. I remember ushers who were concerned to fit as many people as possible at the Communion rail. As we came forward to receive, we formed a respectful line and tried to take the ushers’ direction even when it seemed they were shoe-horning us into places at the rail. We were by no means a procession; our prayer seemed, at this high point of the Mass, to be more individual than community. The priest who ministered the sacrament was hampered by our expectations of coming forward, receiving quickly, and returning to our places for a few minutes of quiet prayer. As an altar server, backing down the sanctuary side of the altar rail, I heard the beginning of the formula “Corpus Domini . . .” and saw the sign of the cross made quickly before the host was placed on the person’s tongue. I remember no time when the reception of Communion had the quality of interpersonal exchange that the action and the formula seem to call for.

All this came back to me as I read Paula Buckner’s fine article “Dominus Vobiscum: The Appeal of the Tridentine Rite in a Post-conciliar Church” in the May 2006 issue of New Theology Review. The persons with whom she spoke told her that in the Tridentine Mass they found a reverence, an awareness of sacrifice, and a sense of the great tradition of Catholic prayer that is often lacking in celebration of the reformed eucharistic liturgy. My bet is that as we celebrate either rite we need to identify and
correct bad habits that have been passed down from generation to generation as poor celebration affected both our theology and our spirituality.

As we identify the bad habits that we have inherited, we need to correct our celebration and preach about the ways in which the rite expresses and celebrates our faith. We preachers can do well to connect to a full and joyous celebration of the rites. For this sort of preaching, we need to look to the great church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries. We may find them a bit bossy as they tell people what to do, but we see them reflecting with the people on the actions they perform in liturgical celebration. Their mystagogy refers back to the reverent joy with which they pray together; they can clearly connect the sacrifice of the individual Christian’s life, through the Communion procession and the reception of the sacrament, with the sacrifice of Christ.

How did we lose hold on the understanding of eucharistic celebration that we find in Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and their contemporaries? The simple form of the answer is the practical one: we stopped receiving sacramental Communion. For hundreds of years our theology of the Eucharist was rooted in a celebration in which only the priest celebrant received. Though the eucharistic prayer asked, “as we receive from this altar the sacred body and blood of your Son, let us be filled with every grace and blessing,” our understanding of that reception was qualified by our sacramental practice. How could priests preach on the action of receiving Communion when many of the faithful received the sacrament only once a year?

As we began to recover sacramental Communion and came, with the influence of the liturgical movement, to have the faithful receive Communion at the Communion time of the Mass, rather than before Mass or during the offertory and the eucharistic prayer, we tried to be careful not unduly to prolong the Mass, lest some of the congregation become impatient—and even leave before the final blessing. Both priests and ushers then were pressed to keep the Communion moving along, lest the Mass schedule be disrupted. We concentrated on receiving Communion quickly and respectfully and returning to our places for uninterrupted prayer.

Come with me in your imagination and stand as a minister of Communion in a Sunday celebration. Let yourself be lost in the exchange with each person who bows the head, steps forward, looks you in the eye, responds “Amen!” with conviction, receives in hand or on tongue, and takes a few steps to stand in the line before the cup. Let yourself hear the song of the whole assembly—a song that you know, that carries you in your ministry, but of whose refrain you can sing only a few words when there’s a slight lull, perhaps as someone with a walker moves slowly forward, catches her breath, and then raises her head to look at you. Notice the care and respect with which the people come forward. Notice that those who receive under only one kind stand in the other line in solidarity of prayer—those with celiac disorder standing, bowing to receive a blessing before they move to drink from the cup; those with alcohol allergies similarly bowing in reverent prayer before deacon or other minister of the cup. Notice how the people come forward for this great sacramental encounter and return to their places without breaking their relationship with one another. Feel this procession moving through the church. Feel the unity of God’s people, offering their lives to God’s transforming action. Feel the reverence for Christ present in the eucharistic feast—and in the sacraments of our Holy Communion in the song and prayer of the assembly moving to accept God’s will for them and in the presider, the deacon, and the other ministers.
of Communion. Know in your bones that Augustine was right: it is our own lives that lie upon the altar; it is our own mystery that we receive. Be certain that God is at work in us all and that God fully intends to send us out to do the ministry of reconciliation. Let yourself be filled with thanksgiving for the liturgical ministry you exercise and for all your fellow ministers. Ask the Lord to keep this imaginary experience in your mind and your heart and to give it to many other people. Beg the Lord, as often as you remember this dream, that it become a reality in the lives of ordinary Catholics.

How will God move us from our very imperfect celebrations to something closer to the ideal envisioned by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy? If we listen to comments and criticisms like those that Paula Buckner reported, we may come to notice points in our celebrations that need attention. With those comments in mind, we can return to documents like General Instruction of the Roman Missal:

• The gestures and postures of the priest, the deacon, and the ministers, as well as those of the people, ought to contribute to making the entire celebration resplendent with beauty and noble simplicity, so that the true and full meaning of the different parts of the celebration is evident and that the participation of all is fostered. . . . (no. 42)

• Among gestures . . . are also actions and processions . . . of the faithful presenting the gifts and coming forward to receive Communion. It is appropriate that actions and processions of this sort be carried out with decorum while the chants proper to them occur. . . . (no. 44)

While the priest is receiving the Eucharist, the Communion chant is begun. Its purpose is to express the communicants’ union in spirit by means of the unity of their voices, to show joy of heart, and to highlight more clearly the “communitarian” nature of the procession to receive Communion. The singing is continued for as long as the Sacrament is being administered to the faithful (GIRM, no. 86).

Preachers have several opportunities to speak about the transformation that God wants to work in our lives. We might focus on some aspect of our common prayer and let it run as an illustration in our preaching. Of all those aspects, why not concentrate on the Communion procession, which is so important in practice and so ignored in traditional catechesis on the sacrament? Let us celebrate the Communion procession reverently and joyously and identify its importance in our preaching and presiding. Cyril and Chrysostom didn’t assume that their people needed no help in unpacking the mysteries that they celebrated. If we preachers, liturgy planners, musicians, and catechists commit ourselves to a more careful celebration of the Communion rite, we may see some serious progress in ourselves and in our liturgical communities.