

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ



28 June 2011

RECEIVING HOLY COMMUNION

My Dear Brother and Sisters,

Two weeks ago we celebrated the Feast of Corpus Christi when we remind ourselves of the gift of the Blessed Sacrament, which we receive in Holy Communion and adore in the tabernacle of every church. In recent weeks many children have made their first Holy Communion, bringing joy to their families. Our faith is clear: in Holy Communion, Christ comes into our inner selves, unworthy though we are, and we are taken into Him to form one Body in Christ through the Sacrament which we share.

In Holy Communion we share in the fruit of Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. Those who are not able to receive Holy Communion continue to share in that fruit, as expressed in the blessing they receive. They receive Christ in a spiritual communion.¹

There are different ways in which we may receive Holy Communion. I want to speak about them now.

The usual practice in our parishes is for the Sacred Host to be received on the hand, standing, and – when practical and prudent to do so reverently- for the Precious Blood to be received from the Chalice, also whilst standing.² This practice of standing is now confirmed in the Liturgical Norm for England and Wales, just recently approved by the Congregation for Divine Worship in Rome.³

This Norm together with the General Instruction of the Roman Missal also provide choices which each recipient is at liberty to make: to receive the Sacred Host in the hand or on the tongue⁴, either standing or kneeling.⁵ Each way has its symbolic and spiritual meaning helping us to be profoundly aware of whom it is that we receive and the unity of faith we share.

When receiving Holy Communion in the hand, we make with our hands the form of both a cross and a throne in which to receive our King who sacrificed his life for us. With clean, empty hands and with gloves removed, we receive him with utter reverence and consume the Host carefully in the presence of the minister before turning away.⁶

When we receive Holy Communion on the tongue, we are aware of coming to be fed with the Food of Life, conscious of our utter dependence on the Lord. We know the holiness of the One we receive, beyond our touch.

When we receive Holy Communion standing we show that we are ready to receive the Lord and to walk and act in His name. In standing we are part of a prayerful procession, a people with a mission, summoned by the Lord to the glory of heaven. This is our baptismal calling and dignity.

When we receive Holy Communion kneeling, we present ourselves with humility and reverence, submitting our strength to Him, recognising that He is Lord of all.

Receiving Holy Communion, we know that Christ, whole and entire, his body and blood, together with his soul and divinity, is truly, really and substantially present. This is so whether we receive Holy Communion under both forms of bread and wine, or in one form alone. However, each form has its own particular meaning or symbolism which enriches our celebration of this Sacrament. In the Sacred Host, Christ is presented as the Body broken for us, in which is our strength; in the Chalice he is the Precious Blood poured out for us, in which is our forgiveness.

Let us deepen our understanding and appreciation of this wonderful gift. We must always present ourselves for communion with the utmost reverence and aware of the immensity of what is taking place. Please reflect on how you personally present yourself to receive the Lord in Holy Communion. Each way of receiving Holy Communion expresses awe and must be carried out with care.

It is important that we also prepare well to receive Holy Communion. We observe a Eucharistic fast, of at least one hour.⁷ We seek forgiveness of our sins, through the penitential prayers of the Mass and through the Sacrament of Penance, especially whenever we are conscious of grave sin.⁸

When we have received the Lord, we concentrate utterly on his presence within us, in prayer and recollection, when we return to our places. A time of silent prayer should follow Holy Communion as we approach the end of Mass. Then, nourished by Holy Communion we leave the church and become, in our world, living ambassadors for Christ, the one we have received. We bring His love and compassion to all we meet.

Today I ask every parish and community to refresh its reverence and love for the Blessed Sacrament and its practice of receiving Holy Communion.

May God bless you all,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

✠Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster

¹ Pope Benedict writes: “Even in cases where it is not possible to receive sacramental communion, participation at Mass remains necessary, important, meaningful and fruitful. In such circumstances it is beneficial to cultivate a desire for full union with Christ through the practice of spiritual communion, praised by Pope John Paul II [*see Ecclesia de Eucharistia*,35] and recommended by saints who were masters of the spiritual life [e.g. St Theresa of Jesus, *The Way of Perfection*, 35 and St. Thomas Aquinas, ST, III, q. 80, art. 1]” *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 55.

² Holy Communion may be distributed under both kinds at Mass, subject to other provisions of the law and provided that it can be carried out with no danger of profanation of the Sacrament (see GIRM 281-287 and the Instruction from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 100-107).

³ This is the norm which has been approved for incorporation in GIRM 160: “In the Dioceses of England and Wales Holy Communion is to be received standing, though individual members of the faithful may choose to receive Communion while kneeling. However, when they communicate standing, it is recommended that the faithful bow in reverence before receiving the Sacrament.”

⁴ See GIRM 161. Permission for Communion in the hand for England and Wales was given 6 March 1976. *Redemptionis Sacramentum* reads: “Although each of the faithful always has the right to receive Holy Communion on the tongue, at his choice, if any communicant should wish to receive the Sacrament in the hand, in areas where the Bishops’ Conference with the *recognitio* of the Apostolic See has given permission, the Sacred Host is to be administered to him or her. However, special care should be taken to ensure that the host is consumed by the communicant in the presence of the minister, so that no one goes away carrying the Eucharistic species in his hand. If there is a risk of profanation, then Holy Communion should not be given in the hand to the faithful” (92).

⁵ *Redemptionis Sacramentum* states: “it is not licit to deny Holy Communion to any of Christ’s faithful solely on the grounds, for example, that the person wishes to receive the Eucharist kneeling or standing” (91). Although Mgr. Guido Marini, the Papal MC, has said that the Holy Father’s preference for communicants to receive Holy Communion on the tongue whilst kneeling better sheds light on the truth of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, he did so “without taking anything away from the other”, i.e. from standing to receive Holy Communion on the hand, where this is permitted (see the *L’Osservatore Romano*, 26 June, 2008).

⁶ The ordinary ministers of Holy Communion are the celebrant(s) assisted by deacons and other priests. Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion may assist where there is a need (see *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 88).

⁷ Code of Canon Law 919 §1 A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine. §2 A priest who celebrates the Most Holy Eucharist two or three times on the same day can take something before the second or third celebration even if there is less than one hour between them. §3 The elderly, the

infirm, and those who care for them can receive the Most Holy Eucharist even if they have eaten something within the preceding hour.

⁸ “As for the Penitential Act placed at the beginning of Mass, it has the purpose of preparing all to be ready to celebrate the sacred mysteries; even so, “it lacks the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance”, and cannot be regarded as a substitute for the Sacrament of Penance in remission of graver sins. Pastors of souls should take care to ensure diligent catechetical instruction, so that Christian doctrine is handed on to Christ’s faithful in this matter” (*Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 80).