

Who Can Receive Communion?

The Holy Eucharist is the most important of the seven sacraments because, in this and in no other sacrament, we receive the very body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Innumerable, precious graces come to us through the reception of Holy Communion.



Communion is an intimate encounter with Christ, in which we sacramentally receive Christ into our bodies, that we may be more completely assimilated into his. "The Eucharist builds the Church," as Pope John Paul II said (*Redemptor Hominis* 20). It deepens unity with the Church, more fully assimilating us into Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; CCC 1396).

The Eucharist also strengthens the individual because in it Jesus himself, the Word made flesh, forgives our venial sins and gives us the strength to resist mortal sin. It is also the very channel of eternal life: Jesus himself.

In John's gospel, Jesus summarized the reasons for receiving Communion when he said:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food, and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me. This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live forever" (John 6:53–58).

Because of the gravity of Jesus' teaching on receiving the Eucharist, the Church encourages Catholics to receive frequent Communion, even daily Communion if possible, and mandates reception of the Eucharist at least once a year during the Easter season. Before going to Communion, however, there are several things one needs to know.

Catholics and Communion

The Church sets out specific guidelines regarding how we should prepare ourselves to receive the Lord's body and blood in Communion. To receive Communion worthily, you must be in a state of grace, have made a good confession since your last mortal sin, believe in transubstantiation, observe the Eucharistic fast, and, finally, not be under an ecclesiastical censure such as excommunication.

First, you must be in a state of grace. "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:27–28). This is an absolute requirement which can never be dispensed. To receive the Eucharist without sanctifying grace in your soul profanes the Eucharist in the most grievous manner.

A mortal sin is *any* sin whose matter is grave and which has been committed wilfully and with knowledge of its seriousness. Grave matter includes, but is not limited to, murder, receiving or participating in an abortion, homosexual acts, having sexual intercourse outside of marriage or in an invalid marriage, and deliberately engaging in impure thoughts (Matt. 5:28–29). Scripture contains lists of mortal sins (for example, 1 Cor. 6:9–10 and Gal. 5:19–21). For further information on what constitutes a mortal sin, see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Out of habit and out of fear of what those around them will think if they do not receive Communion, some Catholics, in a state of mortal sin, choose to go forward and offend God rather than stay in the pew while others receive the Eucharist. The Church's ancient teaching on this particular matter is expressed in the *Didache*, an early Christian document written around A.D. 70, which states: "Whosoever is holy [i.e., in a state of sanctifying grace], let him approach. Whosoever is not, let him repent" (*Didache* 10).

Second, you must have been to confession since your last mortal sin. The *Didache* witnesses to this practice of the early Church. "But first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one" (*Didache* 14).

The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* indicates that the same requirement applies today. "A person who is conscious of a grave sin is not to . . . receive the body of the Lord without prior sacramental confession unless a grave reason is present and there is no opportunity of confessing; in this case the person is to be mindful of the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, including the intention of confessing as soon as possible" (CIC 916).

The requirement for sacramental confession can be dispensed if four conditions are fulfilled: (1) there must be a grave reason to receive Communion (for example, danger of death), (2) it must be physically or morally impossible to go to confession first, (3) the person must already be in a state of grace through perfect contrition, and (4) he must resolve to go to confession as soon as possible.

Third, you must believe in the doctrine of transubstantiation. "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor. 11:29). Transubstantiation means more than the Real Presence. According to transubstantiation, the bread and wine are actually transformed into the actual body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ, with only the appearances of bread and wine remaining. This is why, at the Last Supper, Jesus held what *appeared* to be bread and wine, yet said: "This is my body. . . . This is my blood" (Mark 14:22–24, cf. Luke 22:14–20). If Christ were merely present along side bread and wine, he would have said "This *contains* my body. . . . This *contains* my blood," which he did not say.

Fourth, you must observe the Eucharistic fast. Canon law states, "One who is to receive the most Holy Eucharist is to abstain from any food or drink, with the exception only of water and medicine, for at least the period of one hour before Holy Communion" (CIC 919 §1). Elderly people, those who are ill, and their caretakers are excused from the Eucharistic fast (CIC 191 §3). Priests and deacons may not dispense one obligated by the Eucharistic fast unless the bishop has expressly granted such power to them (cf. CIC 89).

Finally, one must not be under an ecclesiastical censure. Canon law mandates, "Those who are excommunicated or interdicted

after the imposition or declaration of the penalty and others who obstinately persist in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to Holy Communion" (CIC 915).

Provided they are in a state of grace and have met the above requirements, Catholics should receive the Eucharist frequently (CIC 898).

Other Christians and Communion

We welcome our fellow Christians to this celebration of the Eucharist as our brothers and sisters. We pray that our common baptism and the action of the Holy Spirit in this Eucharist will draw us closer to one another and begin to dispel the sad divisions which separate us. We pray that these will lessen and finally disappear, in keeping with Christ's prayer for us 'that they may all be one' (John 17:21).

Because Catholics believe that the celebration of the Eucharist is a sign of the reality of the oneness of faith, life, and worship, members of those churches with whom we are not yet fully united are ordinarily not admitted to Communion. Eucharistic sharing in exceptional circumstances by other Christians requires permission according to the directives of the diocesan bishop and the provisions of canon law.

Scripture is clear that partaking of the Eucharist is among the highest signs of Christian unity: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17). For this reason, it is normally impossible for non-Catholic Christians to receive Holy Communion, for to do so would be to proclaim a unity to exist that, regrettably, does not.

Another reason that many non-Catholics may not ordinarily receive Communion is for their own protection, since many reject the doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Scripture warns that it is very dangerous for one not believing in the Real Presence to receive Communion: "For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. (1 Cor. 11:29–30).

Possible exceptions

However, there are circumstances when non-Catholics may receive Communion from a Catholic priest. This is especially the case when it comes to Eastern Orthodox Christians, who share the same faith concerning the nature of the sacraments:

Catholic ministers may licitly administer the sacraments of penance, Eucharist and anointing of the sick to members of the oriental churches which do not have full Communion with the Catholic Church, if they ask on their own for the sacraments and are properly disposed. This holds also for members of other churches, which in the judgment of the Apostolic See are in the same condition as the oriental churches as far as these sacraments are concerned" (CIC 844 § 3).

Christians in these churches should, of course, respect their own church's guidelines regarding when it would be permissible for them to receive Communion in a Catholic church.

The circumstances in which Protestants are permitted to receive Communion are more limited, though it is still possible for them to do so under certain specifically defined circumstances.

Canon law explains the parameters: "If the danger of death is present or other grave necessity, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop or the conference of bishops, Catholic ministers may licitly administer these sacraments to other Christians who do not have full Communion with the Catholic Church, who cannot approach a minister of their own community and on their own ask for it, provided they manifest Catholic faith in these sacraments and are properly disposed" (CIC 844 § 4).

It is important to remember that, under the rubrics specified above, even in those rare circumstances when non-Catholics are able to receive Communion, the same requirements apply to them as to Catholics.

Non-Christians and Communion

We also welcome to this celebration those who do not share our faith in Jesus Christ. While we cannot admit them to Communion, we ask them to offer their prayers for the peace and the unity of the human family.

Because they have not received baptism, the gateway to the other sacraments, non-Christians cannot receive Communion. However, in emergency situations, they can be received into the Church via baptism, even if no priest is present, and an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion may bring them Communion as Viaticum.

How to receive Communion

Communion may be received either in the hand or on the tongue. Around the year A.D. 390, Cyril of Jerusalem indicated that the early Church practiced Communion in the hand when he instructed his audience: "Approaching, therefore, come not with thy wrists extended, or thy fingers open; but make thy left hand as if a throne for thy right, which is on the eve of receiving the King. And having hallowed thy palm, receive the body of Christ, saying after it, 'Amen.' Then after thou hast with carefulness hallowed thine eyes by the touch of the holy body, partake thereof; giving heed lest thou lose any of it; for what thou lovest is a loss to thee as it were from one of thine own members. For tell me, if anyone gave thee gold dust, wouldst thou not with all precaution keep it fast, being on thy guard against losing any of it, and suffering loss?" (*Catechetical Lectures* 23:22).

Finally, after you have received Communion, it is appropriate to stay after Mass and thank Jesus for coming to you in the Holy Eucharist. The Church mandates that: "The faithful are to be recommended not to omit to make a proper thanksgiving after Communion. They may do this during the celebration with a period of silence, with a hymn, psalm or other song of praise, or also after the celebration, if possible by staying behind to pray for a suitable time" (*Inaestimabile Donum* 17).