



“The Body of Christ.” “Amen.” As we continue our discussion of **Holy Communion**, we consider who is able to receive Communion. The Diocese of Peoria reminds us: “Holy Communion is for all who are properly disposed to receive him. To be properly disposed we must be **Catholic, in a state of grace and have fasted one hour** prior to the reception of Holy Communion” (*A Study of the Mass*, p. 19).

### **A Sign of Unity**

Why **Catholic**? Reception of Holy Communion is the fullest sign of Christian unity. As we said previously, receiving Christ in the Eucharist binds us to him. Since there is one Christ, he draws us together as one. However, what if one person who believes Jesus is truly present receives Communion while another person who believes in only a symbolic presence receives? That would be a problem. That would be two people making an outward sign of unity which would not be true unity. This false unity would not respect the true presence of Jesus, as well as the unity he prayed for at the Last Supper. That is why reception of Holy Communion is first limited to those who believe that Christ is truly present: Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. Since this is the Catholic belief, Catholics (as well as Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches which maintain valid sacraments and believe that Christ is truly present) are eligible to receive Communion. Also, limiting reception of Communion to Catholics protects the integrity of non-Catholics. When we receive Communion, we first hear: “The Body of Christ.” We respond with “Amen,” indicating that we do believe that Jesus’ Body and Blood are truly present and we wish to receive him. For non-Catholics who don’t believe the Body of Christ is really present, receiving Communion would contradict their beliefs. They would be saying “Amen” to a statement that they do not believe. So, not permitting them to receive Communion actually respects their beliefs.

### **Prepared to Receive**

Why must we be in a **state of grace** to receive Communion? Simply put, because Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is God—all-perfect, all-holy, all-love. To receive him in a state of sin is an offense against his goodness. Charles Belmonte teaches, “We should never dare to receive the Eucharist in the state of mortal sin. To do so is to abuse sacrilegiously the mercy of God. Only a shallow and false love, based on mere sentimentality, can bring us to such a detestable course of action. This mistreatment of the sacrament is a grave offense against God. St. Paul’s warning on this issue is quite clear: ‘Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be behaving unworthily toward the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone is to recollect himself before eating this bread and drinking this cup; because a person who eats and drinks without recognizing the body is eating and drinking his own condemnation’ (1 Cor 11:27–29). [...] Therefore, we cannot—and should not—receive our Lord with a soul dirtied by sin. If we realize we have a serious sin, even though we may seem to be contrite, we cannot go and receive the Holy Eucharist without previous sacramental confession” (*Understanding the Mass*, pp. 182–3).

Along these lines, Belmonte notes that St. Pope John Paul II taught, “The two sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist remain closely linked. Without a continually renewed conversion and the reception of the sacramental grace of forgiveness, participation in the Eucharist would not reach its full redemptive efficacy... It is not only that Penance leads to the Eucharist, but that the Eucharist also leads to Penance. For when we realize who it is that we receive in Eucharistic Communion, there springs up almost spontaneously a sense of unworthiness, together with sorrow for our own sins and an interior need for purification” (*Understanding the Mass*, p. 184; John Paul II, *Letter of Holy Thursday* [1986], 8; *DC*, 7). Of course, we know we are unworthy to receive such an amazing gift, but we are obligated to do our best to be as prepared as we can be. That’s why regularly making use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and striving to be in a state of grace is so important.

### **Hungry for God**

Why **fast for an hour** before Communion? When we don’t eat, we become hungry. When we eat a lot, even if it is our favorite food, we don’t want more. Fasting is an age-old way of growing in hunger, in this case for the living God. Our hunger reminds us that we yearn to be filled up, that we yearn to have our hunger satisfied. This works for the body, but it also works for the soul. As we “clear out” room in our hearts through fasting, we realize that the empty space should be filled by God. As St. Augustine once famously said, the only one who really fills that hunger is God (“Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee”). Fasting for an hour helps ensure that we are better focused on God for our nourishment and prepared to receive him in Holy Communion. Fasting before the Mass generally covers food and non-necessary drinks such as alcohol, soda, etc. Water is allowed, as well as medicines. For those who are seriously ill (hospital, nursing home, homebound) and for those who care for them, the rule of fasting does not apply. For example, a person in the hospital who is eating lunch when the priest comes is allowed to receive Communion. The same would be true for a nurse who just finished her lunch break when the priest arrives.

Having reviewed being properly disposed to receive Communion, next time we’ll review the official guidelines for receiving Communion. These guidelines continue to emphasize our belief in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist and provide guidance for people of various backgrounds who might be present at Mass.