

Communion Under Both Kinds

Back in December 2005, Bishop Crowley wrote to the priests of his diocese expressing concern at the fact that communion under both kinds was not being offered in some parishes and reminding us that “communion under both kinds is certainly the mind of the Church and very much the desire of our own Bishops’ Conference”. Despite this, people still point to the Church’s teaching that we receive the fullness of the sacrament even if we receive only the consecrated host. On the surface it might appear that the Church is teaching two contradictory approaches to the sacrament, but this is not, of course, the case and this becomes clear if we take a look at what is actually being said.

The catechism teaches (para 1390):

Since Christ is sacramentally present under each of the species¹, communion under the species of bread alone makes it possible to receive all the fruit of Eucharistic grace.

But it then goes on:

For pastoral reasons this manner of receiving communion has been legitimately established as the most common form in the Latin rite. But the sign of communion is more complete when given under both kinds, since in that form the sign of the Eucharistic meal appears more clearly.

Two distinct things are being said here – one concerning the spiritual aspect of the sacrament and the other concerning the physical sign, and a key phrase in that second section from the catechism is “for pastoral reasons”, referring to why people began to receive the host only.

One of the biggest obstacles to our understanding and reception of holy communion is history. For a long time in our recent past, the majority of people at Mass didn’t receive communion at all – which makes as much sense as going to a restaurant, spending an hour studying the menu, and then deciding not to eat! This habit of non-reception (or at least only annual reception at Easter) probably resulted from a number of factors: the requirement at the time that we had to fast from midnight; a close connection being made between confession and communion such that people felt they couldn’t go to communion unless they had been to confession first; and possibly also a feeling that we were unworthy to receive communion frequently. What was lost was the practice instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper when he blessed and gave his disciples both bread and wine, both his body and blood - that’s how the sacrament was supposed to be received, and that’s how it *was* received for the first ten centuries of the Church.

¹ That is, both bread and wine.

Little by little regular reception of communion became more commonplace once again, but still only under one kind - the host - supported by Church teaching that that was sufficient to receive the fullness of the graces of the sacrament. But that is not what Our Lord intended, otherwise he would not have offered his disciples both bread and wine. When, in 1970, the Church once again permitted the chalice to be offered to everyone, the theology of those centuries should also have been updated in order to ensure that the sacrament would now be received in its fullest form once again (except, of course, by those unable to tolerate alcohol or the taste of wine). To not do so, to leave receiving from the chalice as optional, brings to mind anointing a baby with the oils at baptism but not pouring the water - the sacrament would be invalid, or the bishop at confirmation laying his hands on the candidate's head but not anointing them with chrism – again the sacrament would be invalid.

Whilst receiving only the host doesn't invalidate the sacrament of the eucharist, it just seems strange that the option remains. The physical elements of bread and wine (consecrated to the body and blood of Christ) are the signs and symbols of the sacrament in its fullness, helping us to recognize and experience who and what it is we are receiving. Yes the Church says that we still have that option, but why would we want it? Why would someone not want to receive the fullness of the sacrament by participating in it in the fullest possible way (unless, again, they have an intolerance to wine or its taste)? 1970 should have been a time of great rejoicing amongst Catholics as we were permitted once again to receive communion as it was meant to be received – under both kinds. Instead, nearly forty years later, we still have people walking past the chalice, walking past Jesus who is inviting them, asking them, to “Take and drink, this is my blood” and yet they refuse.

In a very thoughtful article on the subject of receiving from the chalice, Fr Brian Green of the Hallam Diocese wrote:

Every time we are at Mass the priest repeats Our Lord's words “take this, all of you, and drink from it”. It can be very depressing for the minister of the chalice to be passed by - “sorry I'd rather not drink Christ's blood”. It's even more depressing when the local priest has decided there is no option available – “Christ might have wanted it, but I don't”. In the Mass, the separate elements of bread and wine – body and blood – are in fact symbolising the sacrifice which Christ offered in the shedding of his blood. Our emphasis on receiving (only the host) could be making us lose sight of the Mass as a sharing in the Sacrifice of Calvary. There is much to be explored in the symbolism of the cup. In Gethsemane Jesus asked John and James: “are you ready to drink the cup that I am to drink?” Accepting the cup at Mass is itself a potent symbol of our

readiness to take up the cross and follow Jesus. What might we be saying when we fail to join in drinking his cup?

Fr Gerald O'Mahony SJ makes the same point in his book *The Mass From Start to Finish*² In the section entitled "Communion with Jesus in the chalice" he writes:

Jesus made the same requirement for the bread and for the wine. He did not say to eat his body but to be very restrictive about his blood. Admittedly, there is an inbuilt restriction of a sort, which is not often referred to: Jesus linked the chalice with his suffering. 'Can you drink the chalice that I drink?' asks Jesus of James and John, meaning 'Can you suffer alongside me?' As the presiding priest stands in the central place offering the bread of life to those who come up for it, he is offering them Jesus' unconditional love-unto-death with each host. Then the one presiding invites them, implicitly, to go and receive the chalice, if they are willing to answer with James and John, 'Yes, we will carry the cross beside you.' Not everyone can rise to that, and fair enough. (But) in many cases, the courage comes with the chalice: if we do the action, the understanding and the grace follow. The sign of drinking the Precious Blood is (also) a sign of resurrection, since it reunites the human and divine life of Jesus with his body in the one who drinks his blood.

Perhaps it isn't surprising that some may be reluctant to take what they see as a "new" step especially if the change-in-practice hasn't been explained very well. But, as we have seen, it isn't actually a new practice – Jesus consecrated both bread and wine, inviting his disciples to receive both his body and his blood and that was how the early Church celebrated the eucharist and that was how the sacrament used to be received. All the Church has done is to restore that ancient practice.

People should have the opportunity (indeed they have the right) to experience the sign of the sacrament more completely by receiving communion under both kinds and that is the provision that priests are now required to make. At one time we had an excuse for receiving only the body of Christ: that's all that was offered and the theology of the situation is what was taught. The Church has now restored things to how they used to be and has updated its theology and teaching accordingly.

Hopefully, also, when children are being prepared for their first communion, they are not being taught that receiving from the chalice is an option. For their generation it really isn't – just as it should no longer be for ours. It is very easy for children be given a taste of the wine as part of their preparation in order to

² Kevin Mayhew publications.

remove what could be an unnecessary distraction on the day and to make sure that there are no problems with young taste buds! If one or two don't like the taste, then receiving from the chalice can be postponed until they are older and may, by then, have developed a taste for it. Precisely because such concerns can be dealt with ahead of time, they shouldn't become reasons for offering children the option of not receiving from the chalice. It shouldn't be an option unless, as with some adults, they simply don't like the taste. (Receiving the host in the hand should not be an option either - that's how we are now invited to receive. Adult hang-ups about receiving communion shouldn't be passed on to our children.)

Whilst the graces of the sacrament are not restricted by receiving communion under one kind only, when Our Lord's invitation was - and still is - "take and eat, this is my body...take and drink, this is my blood", why³ would we refuse to accept the fullness of that invitation? Yes we have a choice but, especially in this particular context, why would we want one?

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Fr Neil McNicholas

³ unless there are extenuating circumstances