

# The why and how of making a spiritual communion

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Catholics across the world are experiencing an unexpected and unfortunate fast from the Eucharist, which comes in the wake of the novel coronavirus COVID-19. In many ways, the inability of many to receive holy Communion has become an unimaginable Lenten penance.

American Catholics in recent days, such as in other countries across the world, have seen their archbishops and bishops suspending the public celebration of holy Mass or granting dispensations from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass, all in the hope of helping prevent spread of the virus by practicing “social distancing.”

How are Catholics to make sense of this absence of public worship or reception of the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Lord? It might be most helpful to take a brief look at the situation of others, regular Catholic practice and then consider ways to make the best of the situation and continue growing in our relationship with the Lord given the present obstacles.

## Mass and Communion Obligations

First, it should be said that the obligation to attend Sunday Mass and reception of holy Communion are two different things. As a point of fact, not all Catholics receive holy Communion at Mass. For example, Catholics are obliged to refrain from reception of holy Communion when in the state of mortal sin. Not adhering to the eucharistic fast – i.e., refraining from food and drinks other than water an hour before reception of

the sacrament – also can also keep Catholics from receiving Communion. Also to be considered are homebound Catholics who often are unable to receive the Eucharist as frequently as they would like. Or other Catholics might live in distant regions, much like Catholic pioneers in America or modern-day inhabitants of the Amazon, and reception of the Eucharist is a treasured rarity. Or there are immigrant and imprisoned Catholics, or those who are suffering the effects of war, etc.

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Second, it's noteworthy that frequent reception of holy Communion, in reality, is a more recent phenomenon, commonly tied to encouragement of the practice by Pope St. Pius X (pope from 1903-1914). For many centuries, regular reception of holy Communion was not very regular at all. Take, for instance, St. Louis IX (1214-1270), the French monarch renowned for his own sanctity, who received holy Communion only six times a year – and that was thought to be frequent at the time. In fact, the obligation to receive holy Communion remains to this day only once a year for Catholics, and this is sometime during the Easter season, often referred to as our “Easter duty.”

This interesting dichotomy – that the Church requires Catholics to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation (around 60 days, give or take, per year), while it obliges Catholics to receive holy Communion only once per year, according to universal law – tells us that our obligation to participate in the Mass is not contingent upon receiving holy Communion. At the same time, the Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, that should not downplay that “the Church warmly recommends that the faithful receive Holy Communion each time they participate in the celebration of the Eucharist” (No. 1417).

## **An Act of the Whole Church**

Because all the baptized are incorporated into Christ's body, every time Christ is offered to the Father in the Eucharist, the entire Church mystically is present and offered to the Father, "whole and entire" as the Catechism characterizes it (No. 1368). This means that, despite the current lack of public gatherings, we know that the celebration of the Mass continues. Our priests will be celebrating Mass without us, but offering the eucharistic sacrifice for our good.

All members of the Church – the members of Christ's own body – are united with him in each and every Mass. As such, we are all together offered to the Father in sacrifice, as the Catechism relates:

"In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value. Christ's sacrifice present on the altar makes it possible for all generations of Christians to be united with his offering" (No. 1368).

These days, we also are able to take advantage of technology and attend Mass "virtually." Many bishops and priests, and even the pope, are offering live-streams of their daily Masses for the benefit of the faithful. This is a 21st-century method of accomplishing what St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) did, when during an outbreak of plague in Milan during his tenure as archbishop there, he ordered the celebration of the Mass to take place outdoors so people could watch from their homes.

## **Practicing Spiritual Communion**

It's important to recall that, although our obligation to attend Mass might be dispensed, we are never dispensed from honoring the Third Commandment to "keeping holy the Sabbath."

Sunday remains to be set apart as another opportunity to grow in communion with the Lord. When we are unable physically to attend Mass, we may consider the practice of “spiritual communion” – an act to which the saints have given a consistent witness.

Spiritual Communion is a traditional practice of expressing to the Lord our longing for him and our desire for him to enter our hearts. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) said: “When you do not receive communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you.”

St. Jean-Marie Vianney (1786-1859), the famous country priest from Ars, France, once said “when we feel the love of God growing cold, let us instantly make a spiritual Communion. When we cannot go to the church, let us turn towards the tabernacle; no wall can shut us out from the good God.”

How might we go about making a spiritual Communion? St. Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868), the French “apostle of the Eucharist,” suggested the following format:

“If you do not receive (holy Communion) sacramentally, receive spiritually by making the following acts: conceive a real desire to be united to Jesus Christ by acknowledging the need you have to love His life; arouse yourself to perfect contrition for all your sins, past and present, by considering the infinite goodness and sanctity of God; receive Jesus Christ in spirit in your inmost soul, entreating Him to give you the grace to live entirely for Him, since you can live only by him; imitate Zacheus in his good resolutions and thank our Lord that you have been able to hear Holy Mass, and make a spiritual Communion; offer in thanksgiving a special act of homage, a sacrifice, an act of virtue, and beg the blessing of Jesus Christ upon yourself and all your relatives and friends.”

While there is no formula prescribed by the Church to make an act of spiritual communion, prayers composed by various saints are part of the Church's rich treasury of devotions. One of the more popular acts of spiritual communion comes from St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787):

"My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there, and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen."

## **Other Forms of Communion**

Although we might long for fuller unity and communion with the Lord, we must be consoled by his own words: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18: 20).

The Church is truly one body, united in Christ, who is the Word made flesh (see Jn 1:14). We grow in union with the Lord through reading the Scriptures; indeed, Christ feeds us with his word, which the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Word of God ("*Dei Verbum*") calls "food for the soul" (No. 21). "The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body," ("*Dei Verbum*," No. 21).

When unable to attend Mass or receive holy Communion, we can unite ourselves more closely through reading, studying, praying with and discussing the Scriptures. Consider the daily readings offered in the Lectionary. Practice the meditative, reflective "lectio divina" method of praying with the word of God. Encounter the Lord through the psalms and prayers of the

Liturgy of the Hours, which the Catechism states, “is like an extension of the Eucharistic celebration, does not exclude but rather in a complementary way calls forth the various devotions of the People of God, especially adoration and worship of the Blessed Sacrament” (No. 1178). And there’s the holy rosary, which, Pope St. John Paul II noted, puts us “in living communion with Jesus” (“*Rosarium Virginis Mariae*,” No. 2).

## **Living Communion**

Finally, remember that attendance at Mass and receiving holy Communion are acts of the worship of God. By our baptism, and intensified in the reception of holy Communion, we are conformed more and more to Christ. St. Augustine (354-430) wrote: “If you, therefore, are Christ’s body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying ‘Amen’ to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear ‘The body of Christ’, you reply ‘Amen.’ Be a member of Christ’s body, then, so that your “Amen” may ring true!” (Sermon 272).

St. Paul also says our moral life, when properly ordered, is an act of worship. Indeed, by our lives we can worship and live in communion with Jesus. He says, “I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). Here, as Pope Benedict XVI taught, St. Paul “speaks of the liturgy as life. We ourselves, our body; we in our body and as a body must be liturgy. This is the newness of the New Testament, and we shall see it again later: Christ offers himself and thereby replaces all the other sacrifices. And he wants ‘to draw’ us into the communion of his Body. Our body, with his, becomes God’s glory, becomes liturgy ... the true liturgy is that of our body, of our being in the Body of Christ, just as Christ himself made the liturgy

of the world, the cosmic liturgy, which strives to draw all people to itself.”

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