

# A Short History of the Communion Rite

The following article from *The Sheaf*, a publication for students and alumni of St. Bernard's Seminary, tells the history of changes in the manner of receiving Communion. Father Miller is assistant pastor of St. Ambrose Church.

By FATHER MARK MILLER

The experience of participating in the renewal of the liturgy has made many people aware of the need for a careful theological, historical, and

were not intended to support kneeling communicants, but to indicate where the faithful should stand when they received.

Before long, Church councils made it official that lay persons were forbidden to communicate within the sanctuary.

It seems that it was this assignment of different Communion stations to the clergy and the laity that suggested the practice of allowing sinful-but-repentant clergy to receive Communion with the laity, as

receiving Communion. The washing is not just the symbolic preparation for prayer recommended by Hippolytus; it is a very physical preparation for holding the Body of Christ in one's hands. Thus, St. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, writes in 333: "Wherefore, let us not merely proceed to perform the festal rites, but let us be prepared to draw near to the divine Lamb, and to touch heavenly food. Let us cleanse our hands, let us purify the body."

A related thought is expressed by St. John Chrysostom (d. 407), a priest at Antioch who became Bishop of Constantinople:

Tell me, wouldst thou choose to come to the Sacrifice with unwashed hands? No, I suppose, not. But thou wouldst rather choose not to come at all, than come with soiled hands. And then, thus scrupulous as thou art in this little matter, dost thou come with soiled soul, and thus dare to touch it (the host)? And yet the hands hold it but for a time, whereas into the soul it is dissolved entirely.

The practice of giving Communion into the hands of the laity was accompanied by certain problems. One was that sometimes people would not consume the host. This abuse was recognized at the Councils of Saragossa (380) and Toledo (400) in Spain; which decreed severe penalties for it. Another problem was that occasionally lay people would think: If we can hold the Eucharist in our hands when the priest gives it to us, why can we not do without the priest altogether and give Communion to ourselves?

Clement of Alexandria (d. 220) apparently knew of some priests who permitted this: "Some in the dispensation of the Eucharist, according to custom, held that each one of the people should take his part (of the consecrated Bread)."

A related question concerns how the communicant held his hands when he received the host. This strikes us as a very minor point, and the Western Fathers did not worry about it, either. For example, St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in the middle of the third century,

ably following the earlier edition of Mansi, accepts the date 878.

D. The Manner in Which the Faithful Received the Wine.

It was the common practice for the faithful to receive under both species throughout the period we have been studying. We have already examined the manner of receiving the host; now let us consider how the laity drank from the chalice. Again we find that the most elaborate ritual is described for us by Cyril of Jerusalem:

Then after thou has partaken of the Body of Christ, draw near to the Cup of His Blood; not

stretching forth thine hands, but bending, and saying with an air of worship and reverence, Amen, hallow thyself by partaking also of the Blood of Christ. And while the moisture is still upon thy lips, touch it with thine hands, and hallow thine eyes and brow and the other organs of sense.

One problem with passing the cup to the laity, of course, was the danger of spilling. We see references to this as early as Tertullian and Hippolytus. When the barbarians invaded the Church, the problem increased, and various measures

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## 'Christians often received Communion in their homes.'

pastoral investigation of the development of our forms of worship through the centuries. Yet often the time and the resources for such a thorough study are lacking.

This article seeks to concentrate on the historical development of the ritual for Communion, during the period of most rapid change, up to 750 A.D. But since "the mystery of the Eucharist stands as the heart and center of the sacred liturgy" an understanding of the development of this one crucial part may provide a key toward understanding the development of the whole.

A. The Place Where the Faithful Received Communion.

It is important to note, first of all, that the earliest Christians often received Communion outside the liturgical assemblies, in their own homes. Dom Gregory Dix writes:

The faithful took home with them portions of the consecrated Bread from which to make their communions at home on mornings when the liturgy was not celebrated.

As a matter of fact, if a devout third century Christian on his deathbed could have reckoned up all the communions he had ever made, he would probably have found that the large majority had been made from the reserved sacrament at home, quite apart from the liturgy.

This conclusion is based upon evidence from several sources; the earliest is a letter of Tertullian that was written in Carthage shortly after 200 A.D.

St. Cyprian testifies that this was still the practice in Africa a half-century later.

The quotations make it clear that Communion was received at home, but they do not give us many details. Even the bare fact, though, is more interesting, because it indicates a familiarity and an informality that we find a bit startling today. Our main interest, however, is in the manner of receiving Communion at the liturgical assemblies.

The early Christians evidently went to the table (altar) to receive Communion. Patristic writers seem to consider this the accepted ordinary practice, so that they seldom mention it unless they want to make an exception.

For example, Dionysius of Alexandria (d. 265) declares that pregnant women, if they are religious, will not dare "either to approach the holy table or to touch the body and blood of the Lord."

The distinction between clergy and laity led to a distinction in the proper places of each; clerics belonged inside the sanctuary, lay persons outside; and soon this division of territory was clearly marked by a fence. Altar rails are mentioned for the first time in the writings of Zeno, Bishop of Verona from 362-380; Augustine also refers to them.

But those altar rails were taller than ours today; they

a mixed gesture of punishment and reconciliation. Such a procedure is reported in a letter of Pope Cornelius written about 251; it is forbidden by the Council of Ilerda (Spain) in 524.

Whether lay people communicated at the altar or outside the sanctuary, it is certain that they were standing, not kneeling. The standing position was the common practice everywhere until well after the period we are studying.

B. The Cleric Who Distributed Communion.

The earliest testimony concerning the manner of distributing Communion comes from St. Justin the Martyr, writing about 150-155:

And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion.

In some places, the practice of having the deacons give Communion under both forms was continued. Dix reports that "Alexandria appears to have retained this custom . . . down to the fourth century."

In any case, by the time the

## 'The standing position was common practice everywhere.'

Apostolic Constitutions were written in Syria about 380, the bishop is assigned to distribute the consecrated Bread, and the deacon is assigned to administer the chalice:

And let the bishop give the oblation, saying, The body of Christ; and let him that receiveth say, Amen. And let the deacon take the cup; and when he gives it, say, The blood of Christ, the cup of life; and let him that drinketh say, Amen.

Instead of the deacon distributing both the consecrated Bread and the consecrated Wine, he administers only the cup. The Body of Christ is distributed by the bishop — or, in his absence, by the presbyter.

C. The Manner in Which the Faithful Received the Host.

How did the faithful receive the host?

Dionysius of Alexandria stated that he would not dare to rebaptize one who "had stood at the holy table, and had stretched forth his hands to receive the blessed food." That this was still the practice in some places at the end of our period is indicated in a story by Bede (d. 735) about a monk who was only a Brother and yet received the Eucharist "in manu."

That explains why the Fathers frequently urge the faithful to wash their hands before

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