

# *The Gesture of Reverence for Receiving Communion and Giving Thanks* Part 2

Gestures of homage and reverence for the Body of Christ are as old as the magi we hear about in the Christmas story. That is what St. John Chrysostom, the “Golden-Mouthed” bishop of Constantinople, told his congregation 1600 years ago: “*The wise men paid homage to Christ’s Body when it was lying in the manger.*” But he reminded his hearers that, “*Unlike the wise men, you do not merely see Christ’s Body; you know his power as well, and the whole divine plan for our salvation...Let us then awaken in ourselves a feeling of awe, and let us show a far greater reverence than did those foreigners...*”

The Church has constantly desired a deep reverence on the part of all who receive Jesus Christ in Holy Communion. The outward gestures by which inner reverence has been expressed have differed from place to place and changed throughout history. Before the Second Vatican Council, those entering the Communion procession with other communicants and the entire congregation would recite the Act of Contrition. We would move to the Communion rail, kneel, and carefully receive the Host on the tongue (receiving in our hands and from the chalice were not permitted for laypersons in those days).

After the Second Vatican Council, standing in the aisle to receive Holy Communion became a widespread and customary way to receive Communion, either from a priest or deacon, or, after 1973, from a layperson who had been commissioned as an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion. A simpler, shorter formula, “*The Body of Christ,*” invited each communicant to speak a sincere “*Amen,*” to the presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in the assembly that shares it. Receiving the Body of Christ in the hand became an approved option, as did receiving the Precious Blood from the chalice, first on a limited basis, but now allowed at any Eucharist celebrated in our country. Clearly the way in which we Catholics receive Communion has changed since Vatican II, but one thing should be changeless: *our reverence and care in receiving the Lord Jesus in this holy sacrament.*

This is why the bishops of the United States included in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (GIRM) that those receiving Communion should “*make an appropriate gesture of reverence*” (#160). In their adaptation to this document, our bishops have prescribed standing as the posture for receiving Holy Communion in the United States, a posture confirmed by the Vatican, as well as prescribing a “gesture of reverence.” First, some words about standing.



Certainly throughout history and in Western culture, kneeling and genuflecting have expressed a reverence and humility before great personage, for example, before the queen of England. But today, in our contemporary American culture, standing is a more general and customary posture of respect and honor: for example, we rise from our seats when the President of the United States enters a room. Also, standing is a “resurrection” posture: it is how we Easter people symbolically express our sharing in the life of the risen Christ who stood triumphant over sin and the grave. Standing to receive Communion should look and feel different from standing in the check-out lane.

Perhaps such considerations have led our bishops to request unity in standing as we receive the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion, so that our bodies express what we believe in our hearts: the risen Lord is given to us as the pledge of our risen life with him.

The United States bishops have also declared that, “when receiving Holy Communion, the communicant bows his or her head before the Sacrament as a gesture of reverence and receives the Body of the Lord from the minister. The consecrated host may be received either on the tongue or in the hand, at the discretion of each communicant. When Holy Communion is received under both kinds, the sign of reverence is also made before receiving the Precious Blood” (GIRM #160).



Thus, the “reverent gesture” is to be *a bow of the head* before the Sacrament. We come forward to Communion in the usual manner. We approach the Communion minister reverently and come to a complete stop, so as to focus on what we are about to do. Showing the consecrated host, the minister says, “The Body of Christ.” We bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, “Amen.” The minister offers the Sacrament to us, and we reverently receive the Body of Christ either in our hand or on our tongue. When receiving the Sacrament in our hand, we place one hand, palm up, on top of the other hand. Ancient writers called this gesture *making a throne for Christ the King*. After receiving the Sacrament in our hand, we take a short step to the side, stop for a brief moment and then reverently take the consecrated host using the hand which is under the hand holding the host, place it in our mouth and consume the host.

Likewise, when we receive the Precious Blood from the chalice, we approach the chalice and after the minister has said “The Blood of Christ,” we bow our head and then after we have raised our head respond, “Amen.” We then take the chalice into our hands, drink, and return the chalice to the minister who wipes the rim of the chalice using a cloth purificator.

The practice in some places of a communicant taking the consecrated host and then dipping it into the consecrated wine is prohibited by liturgical law. It is also potentially irreverent as drops of the Precious Blood can fall onto the floor.

As a reminder, the “*reverent gesture*” is not simply a nod of the head but an unhurried bow of the head. Through our bow of the head we profess our faith in the Eucharistic presence of Christ, and express our reverence.

Finally, the General Instruction states that, after all have received Holy Communion, a period of quiet prayer and reflection is desired. Private prayer and thanksgiving, rooted in sacred silence, has long been a recommended practice through which the priest and faithful offer thanks for gift of the Lord in Holy Communion. The length of silence is dependent on the level of festivity and liturgical season. It should blend in with the rhythm of the Communion Rite. The Communion Rite is brought to completion with the Prayer after Communion by which the priest, in the name of the community, prays for the fruits of the mystery just celebrated.

