

Year of the Eucharist

October 2004 to October 2005

Part 38 in a series on
The Year of the Eucharist
from the
Department of Worship & Spiritual Life
Catholic Diocese of Memphis
in Tennessee

The Structure of the Mass The Liturgy of the Eucharist

THE COMMUNION RITE

The Invitation to Holy Communion

Several years ago my work in a parish brought me to a meeting with the first and third generations of a family to help them plan the funeral liturgy for a second generation member. Anne, the mother of some and daughter of another, had suffered with arthritis and all its complications since early childhood. Now in her mid-fifties, her suffering was finally over. Later at the Vigil, I stood at the coffin with her eighty-year old mother. She remarked on her own ability to feel deep grief and great relief simultaneously. While she was grateful that her daughter's suffering had finally come to an end, she also grieved for the loss of her daily presence in the life of the family.

I have often marveled at the capacity we have as human beings to feel conflicting emotions at the very same moment. While grief and joy would seem to be opposites, they can and do reside in us at a given time.

At Mass, before we process forward to receive Holy Communion, together we pray: *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.*

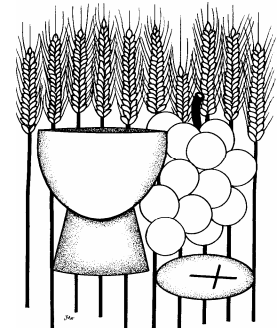
These words move and inspire us; they call us to remember our unworthiness and to remember that God, who is Love, invites and heals. As we come forward, our experience of God is twofold: unworthiness and gratitude for so great a gift. Yet I have discovered that what echoes in many people while they approach receiving Holy Communion is predominantly a sense of unworthiness. It is as if sometimes we don't hear the end of this beautiful prayer. While this prayer is a humble admission of our total unworthiness for God to enter our dwelling, it is also a joyful proclamation that this is exactly what God desires, and God alone can "say the word and heal us" of our unworthiness.

Just as Anne's mother and sons experienced sorrow and joy living side by side within them, we can experience unworthiness, gratitude, humility, joy and much more as we prepare to receive Christ in the Eucharist.

The words of the priest are from the Gospel of John (1:29). Holding the Eucharistic Bread for all to see he says: *This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.* He then adds the words adapted from Revelation 19:9: *Happy are those who are called to his Supper.*

The response of the people is found in the Gospel of Matthew (8:8): *Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.*

Perhaps the next time we pray these sacred words, we can be more accepting of the mystery before us in the Eucharist as well as the mystery we are as human beings growing into further union with God.



From the General Instruction on the Roman Missal

#158 After this [the Lord, I am not worthy...] standing and turned toward the altar, the priest says quietly, *May the Body of Christ bring me to everlasting life*, and reverently receives the Body of Christ. Then he takes the chalice, saying quietly, *May the Blood of Christ bring me to everlasting life*, and reverently receives the Blood of Christ.

#159 The Communion chant [hymn] begins while the priest is receiving the Sacrament.

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