



## The Communion Procession

The Communion Procession is perhaps the most challenging ritual in our current liturgy. The reasons are complex. In general, it may be that we often choose a personal rather than a communal approach when considering the Communion Procession. In the Eucharistic Prayer that precedes the Communion Rite, we pray with the priest as he calls on the Holy Spirit to transform the bread and wine into Christ's body and blood. After the consecration, we join him in his prayer that the Holy Spirit make us all one. In the Communion Procession, we live out the hope of our prayers by moving and singing together as a united people. In this procession, we become a physical sign of the Body of Christ.

The Communion Rite begins with the *Lord's Prayer* and continues until the *Prayer After Communion* is prayed. During that time, the community processes and sings together as it moves forward to receive communion. According to the General Instruction to the Roman Missal (GIRM) and the Missal itself, the song begins as the priest receives, signaling that he too is a member of the community, and concludes when all have received. Then, the priest and the faithful may spend time in quiet reflection. To close the Communion Rite, the priest prays the *Prayer After Communion*.

This ritual has some interlopers, however. They distort and change its meaning and purpose as set out in the GIRM. One grievous result is the loss of a time for quiet thanksgiving by the community. While some individuals pray immediately after receiving, this is not what the missal calls for. This personal act, while allowed, breaks down the communal sign of singing together and then praying together. Ideally, the assembly sits or kneels to give thanks after the last person receives. The conclusion of the Communion Song might well signal this change in posture for the assembly.

Having the community continue to stand and

watch as the vessels are emptied and the hosts are returned to the tabernacle delays their time for personal prayer. The public cleansing of vessels adds to this delay. None of these are liturgical actions that require the notice or participation of the assembly.

There are solutions. First, presiders may simply make sure that whatever happens during the rite, there is always ample time for quiet prayer after communion for the entire community. Second, vessels may be purified after Mass or at least out of sight at the credence table as the GIRM allows. Meanwhile, the community may kneel or sit to pray. Third, any remaining hosts may be returned to the tabernacle without the assembly's attention. Having received the Body of Christ within themselves, the community need not stand in veneration of the reserved sacrament. This practice may stem from experiences at Exposition and Benediction but it is out of place and distracting at Mass. Fourth, the GIRM encourages the reception of hosts consecrated at the Mass attended by the faithful, thus making the use of the tabernacle unnecessary in most cases.

Implementing these four solutions would bring our celebrations closer to what the Roman Missal envisions. Changing our practice need not be difficult. Communion ministers might assess the number of needed hosts before Mass and consume any remaining hosts or consecrated wine afterward. Presiders and deacons might consider less public ways of cleansing the vessels. All of us might strive to sing and give thanks together as one body, the Body of Christ.

St. Augustine said that in the Eucharist we receive what we are, and we become what we receive: "Be a member of the Body of Christ so that your *Amen* may be true." By making the principle of full, conscious and active participation a priority, as the liturgy documents ask, we may find ways to make the Communion Procession both more prayerful and more engaging.