



Relationship with GOD

More than Just SUNDAY

The Medicine of Immortality (Don't Take on an Empty Stomach)

Ingrid, my daughter, received her first Holy Communion last month. And although four older siblings had received their first communions before her, the event felt especially meaningful to me this time around.

Early in 2017 I was invited to write a book called *A Devotional Journey into the Mass: How Mass can Become a Time of Grace, Nourishment, and Devotion* for Sophia Institute Press. Insofar as it required writing, I found it difficult. On the other hand, given that it was 20 years in the making—the fruit of questions and discussions during diocesan and parish presentations, teaching in the Diocesan Lay Formation Institute, and serving on the formation teams for the Diocesan Leader of Prayer program and Diaconate Formation program—it was just a matter of putting pen to paper (so to speak) and recording the fruits of this wonderful job I have.

A Devotional Journey into the Mass is really a “how-to” guide for praying the Mass, including chapters on “How to Make the Sign of the Cross,” “How to Pray the Opening Prayer,” and “How to Prepare the Heart at the Offertory.” But the chapter that came to mind during my daughter’s first communion, and the one whose insights I’ll place before my own family as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi) on June 3, is “How to Receive Communion to the Fullest.”

I say receive “to the fullest” because the mechanics of receiving—getting in line, making the reverential bow, receiving from the minister—are not complicated. (Even though my 8-year-old was surely nervous about them!) What is more difficult is receiving the Body and Blood of Jesus in such a way that we become transformed, sanctified, divinized.

The first step to receiving communion to the fullest is being free from mortal sin. Mortal sin is the deliberate choice, that is, both knowing it and willing it, of “something gravely contrary to the

divine law and to the ultimate end of man” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1874). The Eucharist is powerful medicine: filled with Jesus and on fire with the Holy Spirit, it brings us face-to-face with God the Father. If something as simple as ibuprofen needs a fit and full stomach to be effective, how much more does the Eucharist! In fact,

there’s a rather startling line from what is called the *Sequence*, read or sung on Corpus Christi Sunday just before the Gospel:

Bad and good the feast are sharing,
Of what divers dooms preparing,
Endless death, or endless life.
Life to these, to those damnation,
See how like participation
Is with unlike issues rife.

In short: far more important (although not unrelated) than the prescribed postures and gestures at receiving is preparing our spirits, hearts, and stomachs for Jesus. The first necessary task is removing mortal sin from within.

The second step isn’t so much about removing but filling. If my sin chooses me instead of God, replacing it with humility—the more the better—invites God in to do his Eucharistic best.

Saint Augustine illustrates the transformative power of the Body and Blood of Christ in his conversation with the Eucharistic Jesus: “I am the food of grown men,” he hears Jesus say; “grow, and you shall feed upon me; nor shall you change me, like the food of your flesh, into yourself, but you shall be changed into me.” Simply put: “It is not the eucharistic food that is changed into us,” says Pope Benedict, “but rather we who are mysteriously transformed by it” (Exhortation on “The Eucharist as the Source and the Summit of the Church’s Life and Mission” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*), 70).

But since our stomachs must be filled with humility in order for Jesus to change us, the Church places on our lips the humble words of the powerful Roman Centurion of Capernaum. When Jesus offers to come into his house to heal his dying servant, the Centurion, despite his great worldly stature and authority, says to Jesus, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed” (Matthew 8:8).

When an unstoppable force—the Eucharistic Jesus—meets an immovable object—the human heart—nothing good can happen in us. Only when that heart is moving away from sin and is humble enough to be changed—to be divinized—will the Eucharist achieve its full fruitfulness in us.

This, at least, is what I’ll remind Ingrid of as she receives Jesus on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. And I’ll surely do well to remember these truths myself.

By Christopher Carstens, Director for Sacred Worship and RCIA

