

# The Manner of Receiving Holy Communion

## Memoriale Domini

This Instruction, prepared at the special mandate of the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI, was duly approved by him, in virtue of apostolic authority, on May 28, 1969. Pope Paul also decreed that it be brought to the attention of the bishops through the presidents of the episcopal conferences.

### **First, some points worth emphasizing followed by the complete Memoriale Domini.**

The instruction acknowledged that there was a desire in some places to return to the ancient practice of communion in the hand and that, in certain communities this practice was introduced **without** prior approval having been requested of the Holy See and without appropriate preparation for the people".

The Instruction noted that this was an **ancient** practice but underlined the reverence that was always shown to the Eucharist. Later, with a deepening understanding of the truth of the Eucharistic Mystery, of Its power and of the presence of Christ in It, there came a greater feeling of reverence towards this Sacrament and a deeper humility was felt to be demanded when receiving It. Thus the custom was established of the Minister placing a particle of consecrated bread **on the tongue** of the communicant."

Because "a small number" of episcopal conferences had asked for communion in the hand, Pope Paul VI thought that it would be good to consult all of the Bishops. A large majority were **opposed** to the introduction of communion in the hand; the document gives the figures and then says: "From the returns, it is clear that the vast majority of bishops believe that the present discipline should not be changed, and that if it were, the change would be **offensive** to the sentiments and the spiritual culture of these bishops and of many of the faithful".

Therefore, taking into account the remarks and the advice of those whom "the Holy Spirit has placed to rule over" the Churches, in view of the gravity of the matter and the force of the arguments put forward, the Supreme Pontiff judged that the long received manner of ministering Holy Communion on the tongue should **not be changed**.

Unfortunately, a concession was granted that if communion in the hand had **already** come to **prevail** in a particular country (**illegally**, as the document had already noted), the bishops should weigh matters carefully, "taking care to avoid any risk of lack of respect or of false opinions with regard to the Blessed Eucharist, and to avoid any other ill effects that may follow."

Many took advantage of this loophole, even countries where it was **not yet the practice** and the result is exactly what the Pope had warned them about. Diminished Reverence towards the Holy Eucharist.

# Memoriale Domini, The Instruction on the Manner of Administering Holy Communion

The Congregation for Divine Worship on May 29, 1969

When it celebrates the memorial of the Lord, by that rite the Church witnesses to its faith and adoration of Christ, who is present in the sacrifice and who is given as food to those who share in the Eucharistic table.

For this reason it is of great concern that the Eucharist be celebrated and shared in most worthily and fruitfully, by observing unchanged the tradition that has reached us step by step, the tradition whose riches have been poured into the practice and life of the Church. The documents of history demonstrate that the ways of celebrating and receiving the holy Eucharist have been diverse. Even in our time many and important ritual changes have been introduced into the celebration of the Eucharist in order to bring it into accord with the spiritual and psychological needs of men today. Because of circumstances, communion under both kinds, bread and wine, which was once common in the Latin rite but had fallen into disuse little by little, has again been made a part of the discipline governing the faithful's mode of receiving the holy Sacrament. At the time of the Council of Trent a different situation had arisen and was in effect everywhere; the Council approved and defended it as suited to the conditions of that period. (1)

With the renewal of the modes of communicating, however, the sign of the Eucharistic meal and the complete fulfillment of Christ's mandate have been effected more clearly and vividly. At the same time a full sharing in the celebration of the Eucharist, expressed through Sacramental communion, has recently stirred up in some places the desire to return to the practice by which the Eucharistic bread is placed in the hand of the faithful who communicates himself by putting it in his mouth.

In some communities and localities this rite has even been performed without obtaining the prior approval of the Apostolic See and occasionally without appropriate preparation for the people.

It is true that, according to ancient usage, it was once permitted for the faithful to take the sacred food in their hands and themselves to place it in their mouths and even, in the earliest period, to carry the holy Sacrament with them from the place of celebration, especially in order to receive it as viaticum if they should have to suffer for the profession of the faith.

Nevertheless the precepts of the Church and the writings of the Fathers give abundant witness to the great reverence and prudence shown to the holy Eucharist. For "no one . . . eats this flesh unless first he adores," (2) and each recipient is warned: ". . . receive it and take care that none of it be lost to you" (3): "for it is the body of Christ." (4)

In the meantime the care and ministry of the Body and Blood of the Lord was entrusted in a quite special way to sacred ministers or to persons assigned to this function: "After the president has completed the prayers and all the people have made the acclamation, those among us whom we call deacons distribute a part of the bread and wine and water, in which the thanksgiving has been made, to each one present and bring them to those who are absent." (5)

The office of bringing the Eucharist to those who were absent was soon entrusted to sacred ministers alone, for the reason that greater care might be shown for the reverence due to the Body of Christ as well as for the needs of the people. In the following period, after the true meaning of the Eucharistic mystery, its effect, and the presence of Christ in it had been profoundly investigated, from a pressing sense of reverence toward this holy

Sacrament and of the humility which its reception demands, the custom was introduced by which the minister himself would place the piece of consecrated bread on the tongue of the communicants.

In view of the state of the Church as a whole today, this manner of distributing Holy Communion must be observed, not only because it rests upon a tradition of many centuries but especially because it is a sign of the reverence of the faithful toward the Eucharist. The practice in no way detracts from the personal dignity of those who approach this great Sacrament and it is a part of the preparation needed for the most fruitful reception of the Lord's body. (6)

This reverence is a sign of communion not in "common bread and drink" (7) but in the Body and Blood of the Lord. By it "the people of God shares in the blessings of the paschal sacrifice, renews the new covenant once made by God with man in the Blood of Christ, and in faith and hope prefigures and anticipates the eschatological banquet in the kingdom of the Father." (8)

In addition, this manner of communicating, which is now to be considered as prescribed by custom, gives more effective assurance that Holy Communion will be distributed with the appropriate reverence, decorum, and dignity; that any danger of profaning the Eucharistic species, in which "the whole and entire Christ, God and man, is substantially contained and permanently present in a unique way," (9) will be avoided; and finally that the diligent care which the Church has always commended for the very fragments of the consecrated bread will be maintained: "If you have allowed anything to be lost, consider this a lessening of your own members." (10)

On this account, since some few episcopal conferences and individual bishops had asked that the usage of placing the consecrated bread in the hand of the faithful be admitted in their territories, the Supreme Pontiff decreed that each bishop of the entire Latin Church should be asked his opinion concerning the appropriateness of introducing this rite. A change in a matter of such importance, which rests on a very ancient and venerable tradition, besides touching upon discipline can also include dangers. These may be feared from a new manner of administering Holy Communion: they are a lessening of reverence toward the noble Sacrament of the altar, its profanation, or the adulteration of correct doctrine

Three questions were therefore proposed to the bishops:

1. Does it seem that the proposal should be accepted by which, besides the traditional mode, the rite of receiving Holy Communion in the hand would be permitted?

Yes: 567      No: 1,233      Yes, with reservations: 315      Invalid votes: 20

2. Should experiments with this new rite first take place in small communities, with the assent of the local Ordinary?

Yes: 751      No: 1,215      Invalid votes: 70

3. Do you think that the faithful, after a well planned catechetical preparation, would accept this new rite willingly?

Yes: 835      No: 1,185      Invalid votes: 128

From the responses received it is thus clear that by far the greater number of bishops feel that the present discipline should not be changed at all, indeed that if it were changed, this would be offensive to the sensibilities and spiritual appreciation of these bishops and of most of the faithful.

After he had considered the observations and the counsel of those whom "the Holy Spirit has placed as bishops to rule" (11) the Churches, in view of the seriousness of the matter and the importance of the arguments proposed, the Supreme Pontiff judged that the long received manner of ministering Holy Communion to the faithful should not be changed.

The Apostolic See therefore strongly urges bishops, priests, and people to observe zealously this law, valid and again confirmed, according to the judgment of the majority of the Catholic episcopate, in the form which the present rite of the sacred liturgy employs, and out of concern for the common good of the Church.

If the contrary usage, namely, of placing Holy Communion in the hand, has already developed in any place, in order to help the episcopal conference fulfill their pastoral office in today's often difficult situation, the Apostolic See entrusts to the conferences the duty and function of judging particular circumstances, if any. They may make this judgment provided that any danger is avoided of insufficient reverence or false opinions of the Holy Eucharist arising in the minds of the faithful and that any other improprieties be carefully removed.

In these cases, moreover, in order to govern this usage properly, the episcopal conferences should undertake the appropriate deliberations after prudent study; the decision is to be made by a two-thirds majority by secret ballot.

These deliberations should then be proposed to the Holy See for the necessary confirmation, together with an accurate explanation of the reasons which moved the conferences to take this action. The Holy See will weigh the individual cases with care, remembering the bonds which exist between the several local Churches among themselves and with the entire Church, in order to promote the common good and edification and the increase of faith and piety which flow from mutual good example.

This Instruction, prepared at the special mandate of the Supreme Pontiff Paul VI, was duly approved by him, in virtue of apostolic authority, on May 28, 1969. Pope Paul also decreed that it be brought to the attention of the bishops through the presidents of the episcopal conferences.

Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

Rome, May 29, 1969.

Benno Card. Gut Prefect

A. Bugnini,  
Secretary

#### FOOTNOTES:

1 Cf. Council of Trent, session XXI, doctrine concerning communion under both kinds and communion of children: Denz. 1726-1717 (930); session XXII, decree on the petition for the concession of the cup: Denz. 1760.

2 Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 98, 9: PL 37, 1264.

3 Cf. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses Mystagogicae*, V, 21: PG 33, 1126.

4 Hippolytus, *Traditio Apostolica*, n. 37; ed. B. Botte, 1963, p. 84.

5 Justin, *Apologia I*, 65: PG 6, 427.

6 Cf. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 98, 9: PL 37, 1264-1265.

7 Cf. Justin, *Apologia I*, 66: PG 6, 427; cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.4, c. 18. n. 5: PG 7, 1028-1029.

8 S. Congregation of Rites, instruction *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, n. 3a: AAS 59 (1967) 541.

9 Cf. *ibid.* n. 9, p. 547.

10 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses Mystagogicae*, V, 21: PG 33, 1126.

11 Cf. Acts 20: 28. and Cf. II Vatican Council, decree *Christus Dominus*, n. 38, 4: AAS 58 (1966) 693.