

Some time ago we introduced the practice of Communion under both kinds, not only at weekday masses, but on Sundays too. It seems that quite a lot of parishioners do not understand this tremendous gift, and do not receive from the Cup. I would like you to think and talk about this. Please read on!

This Is The Cup....

How We Used To Be

When I first went to the Venerable to begin study for the Priesthood, communion under both kinds was still a rarity in this country. I was delighted to find that it was the norm in the College, and over the next few years it made a deep impression on me. There was quite a collection of plate in the sacristy, but we made a practice at most Masses of using a massive silver chalice which Pope Paul VI had given to us on his visit to our Villa at Palazzola, across the lake from his own villa at Castel Gandolfo. I used to make a beeline for this chalice. It was a very broad, generous, heavy cup, conical in section: its surface when filled with wine was like a mirror. Meditating on “the Cup” of the Garden of Gethsemane, it was an arresting fact that one saw one’s own reflection in this surface just before drinking. Every day I thought how we must accept our own life, with all its burdens and awkwardness, before we can accept any other vocation from God; as Jesus accepted his human burdens, including the burden of the Cross, obediently.

Do As You’re Told

I’ve always associated the Cup with obedience. *Do this in memory of Me* seems to me to be the heart of our obedience to Jesus, and we do it every day, meticulously carrying out what he did, as it is handed down to us from the Apostles. I was already impatient with the former practice of not offering the Cup to the whole people. It seemed like emptying the Sacrament of half its powerful symbolism, in effect restricting to the clergy something which Jesus wanted everyone to share: *Take this, ALL OF YOU, and drink from it.*

How We Lost The Cup

In the early Church the command was observed in full; but by the seventh century it was falling by the wayside, mainly because of the fear of spillage, and from the barbarous nature of the times; but also because lay people were receiving Communion increasingly rarely, and when they did, they followed the procedure for Communion from the reserved Sacrament, that is, under one kind (the precious Blood was never reserved). Various means were adopted at different times to minimise the risk of spillage: the use of a little spoon in the East, a metal straw or *canula* in the West. The practice of dipping the sacred Host in the Chalice was tried for a while, but was condemned in the West by the thirteenth century. It is now permitted in a case of extreme difficulty, but communion can only be administered in this way by a priest; it is *forbidden* for a communicant to dip the sacred Host in the Chalice - or, indeed, to do anything with it except to *take it and eat it*. And this is not just because of the risk of spilling.

Why Can’t We Dip The Host?

Why does the Church so insist on this rule? Go back to the command of Christ, and look again at the words he uses, which have been so faithfully preserved for us. He tells us that *this* (bread broken) *is his body, given for us*, and tells us to take the broken bread and eat it. Then he speaks, not of “*this wine*”, but of “*the Cup of my blood*”; it is *the Cup* he tells us to take, and to drink from (all of us). You can see at once the complexity of the Sacrament: the *bread* is broken from one loaf, and becomes *many*; the *Cup* is passed through many hands, but remains *one*. The sharing is distributive, of the bread, and unitive, of the Cup. We have a daughter-symbol of the loving-cup at our family table, the cup with two handles, which travels to everyone, and unites all. The act of drinking *from the Cup* is the heart of the sign.

Bread And Cup

So in common parlance we speak of the sign delivered at the Last Supper as *the Bread and the Cup*. The two modes of the Sacrament both have their contribution to make, and being symbols, they are beyond definition; they take new power every time we celebrate them, and we should never diminish them to one meaning or one form of words. They are the presence of Christ, who comes to heal, to call, to lead, to teach, to feed, to judge, to strengthen, to welcome, to unite, to forgive, to console, to share, and for so many other deeds. The Eucharist is so basic a symbol, it assumes new sense and force in every new time and space. To cut the Eucharist down to only one of its modes is to shorten the meaning Christ gives it.

“I Don’t Need The Cup!”

When the Reformers accused the Church of withdrawing the Cup in opposition to Christ’s command (which is the sort of distorted accusation that’s made when a family is at war with itself) the Catholic Church defined that receiving Communion under one kind alone was sufficient. That is understood; it justified the universal practice at the time. But it doesn’t mean that *when both kinds are offered* it makes no difference whether you receive both or not. To my mind, to refuse the Cup *when it is offered* is liturgically wrong. At the Last Supper Peter refused to be washed, but reconsidered. I can’t imagine any of the Twelve refusing the Cup for any reason whatever, and I can’t understand how anyone refuses it in our Churches. Simply to walk away indifferently is, I find, an ugly, wrong thing to do. If someone walked past the Blessed Sacrament in the monstrance with such indifference, we would feel a sense of impropriety. I feel the same when I offer the Cup of Christ, and it is rejected.

It should be said that some people have good reason to do so, on very restricted grounds based in chemistry; but I think they are very rare. I’ve heard some spurious reasons:

- “*I’ve promised never to let alcohol pass my lips.*” Very good - but you aren’t being offered alcohol, but the blood of Christ. You aren’t invited to enjoy the taste, or to be drunk. You are invited to enter into a sacred mystery in obedience to Jesus.
- “*I might catch a disease.*” The alcohol-content of the wine, coupled with the careful wiping of the rim of the chalice, reduces such a possibility to almost nothing. If the cup is plated with precious metal, that is a further powerful antiseptic. There is *no* documented case of disease being passed from a common cup in Church in this way.
- “*I don’t like wine.*” The Sacraments aren’t there to enjoy, but to be an encounter with Christ, who chose this sign and commanded us to do it in memory of him. It isn’t a matter of taste!
- “*I associate the smell of wine with alcohol abuse.*” Perhaps we could learn to associate it with something holier, with this sacred sign instituted by Jesus. It might make the Eucharist a healing experience for some bad memories.
- “*I’m driving a car after Mass.*” The presence of a sip of the consecrated wine in the bloodstream is quite incapable of impairing a driver’s competence.
- “*I’ve received Communion for years without it, and I’ve no intention of changing now.*” One can only point to the command of Christ, and bear witness to the fact that the Sacrament he instituted is the one we must celebrate, as fully as we are allowed. We mustn’t get stuck in our ways, if they impoverish our religious experience.

The tradition I received from the Lord and handed on to you, is that on the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it, and said: This is my Body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me. In the same way with the Cup after supper, he said: This Cup is the new covenant in my Blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me. Whenever you eat this bread then, and drink this Cup, you are proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes.