



Why are there so many restrictions around receiving Communion?

*A commentary by Maria Caulfield, MA
Assistant Chancellor, Diocese of Erie*

Arnold Böcklin, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

“Why are there so many restrictions around receiving Communion? I don’t think it is right to deny anyone the Eucharist.”

This question came up a number of times in listening sessions related to the Synod on Synodality, both in 2024 and in the first round in 2022. Since we are in the midst of a Eucharistic Revival in the United States, now seems an opportune moment to look at why the Church is so protective of the Eucharist.

Faith magazine is publishing part one of a two-part series on this question, but also noted it would be posted in its entirety for those who would like to read the full piece immediately.

It is not surprising that so many of us are frustrated and confused with the teaching on the Eucharist. Jesus’ followers felt the same way when He first brought up the idea of giving them His flesh to eat. All four Gospels include the miracle of Jesus feeding over 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. John chapter 6, known as the Bread of Life Discourse, continues the story. The day after the miracle, that same crowd went looking for Jesus. They wanted more bread, and they asked Jesus to do a miracle so that they might believe in Him – even though they had just yesterday seen the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” (John 6:35) The crowd began murmuring about Him and His strange answer. In response, Jesus went even further. “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” (John 6:51) This did not soothe the crowd. In fact, they began to quarrel among themselves. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” But Jesus upped the ante again:

“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.

...Then many of his disciples who were listening said, ‘This saying is hard; who can accept it?’... As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.” (John 6:53-66)

The teaching on the Eucharist was divisive from the very beginning. Jesus’s insistence that He Himself is the Bread of Life, that we must actually eat His actual flesh in order to have eternal life, drove people away. Jesus did not run after them, to clarify or comfort or call them back. He stood by what He said. He let them go. He even asked the apostles, “Do you also want to leave?” (John 6:67). And the apostles, though they did not understand what He meant either, chose to stay. Peter spoke for the group: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

The Bread of Life Discourse is John’s only treatment of the Eucharist. He leaves it to the other three Gospels to describe how Jesus instituted the Eucharist at the celebration of the Passover on the night before His passion and death.

Passover, which is celebrated to this day, commemorates the night that God saved the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. We all know the story. God sent Moses to Pharaoh with the message “Let my people go.” Pharaoh refused, and so God used Moses to send a series of ten plagues upon Egypt. The tenth and last plague was the death of the firstborn. While the Hebrews had been automatically exempted from the first nine plagues, the tenth plague was different. God gave them specific instructions to follow on the night of the Passover or else their firstborn children would also die. Each household had to take a lamb, a year-old male without any blemishes, and sacrifice it without breaking any of its bones. Then they put the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of the doorway of their house. The lamb itself was roasted whole and eaten inside the house marked with its blood, along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs and all the rest of the Passover ceremony. God told them, “For on this same night I will go through Egypt, striking down every firstborn of the land, both man and beast, and executing judgment on all the gods of Egypt – I, the LORD! But the blood will mark the houses where you are. Seeing the blood, I will pass over you; thus, when I strike the land of Egypt, no destructive blow will come upon you.” (Exodus 12:12-13) The Israelites were protected from death and freed from slavery by the sacrifice of the lamb, by being marked with its blood and by eating its flesh.

The Passover clearly prefigures both the Passion of Our Lord and the Eucharist, which are intimately and integrally related to each other. John the Baptist pointed Jesus out to his own disciples by saying: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) We use this same description at every Mass right before Communion. First the whole community recites or sings: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us,” and after the third time, “grant us peace.” Then the priest raises the sacred host and the chalice, saying: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.” Jesus was a male, in the prime of life, without any stain or blemish, who was killed, as the Gospel of John tells us, without breaking any of His bones (John 19:33). Not only that, but He died during the feast of Passover, conquering death and freeing us from slavery to sin. In fact, in most languages the word for Easter as some



Agnus Dei, Zurbarán,
Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

version of Pascha, which is the Aramaic word for Passover. (Aramaic is derived from Hebrew and was the native tongue of Jesus and His Jewish contemporaries.) Pascha survives in English as an adjective. For example, the Gospel acclamation on Easter Sunday proclaims: “Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed; let us then feast with joy in the Lord.”

**THIS SAYING IS HARD;
WHO CAN ACCEPT IT?**

world.” (John 1:29) We use this same description at every Mass right before Communion. First the whole community recites or sings: “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us,” and after the third time, “grant us peace.” Then the priest raises the sacred host and the chalice, saying: “Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.” Jesus was a male, in the prime of life, without any stain or blemish, who was killed, as the Gospel of John tells us, without breaking any of His bones (John 19:33). Not only that, but He died during the feast of Passover, conquering death and freeing us from slavery to sin. In fact, in most languages the word for Easter as some

LET US THEN FEAST WITH JOY IN THE LORD!

At the first Passover, it was not enough that the lamb be sacrificed. It also had to be eaten. Thus on the night before His Passion, while celebrating the Passover with His disciples, Jesus instituted the Eucharist. "Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.' And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.'" (Luke 22:19-20)

This IS my body. This IS my blood. Not a symbol; not even a powerful sign like the Passover lamb: the Eucharist is the real deal. "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." (John 6:55) The lamb that was sacrificed had to be eaten for the covenant to be fulfilled. Jesus is the Lamb of God, the lamb once slain who lives forever. He gave us Himself, His very flesh and blood, as the meal of the New Covenant. Not content to make the Church into His mystical body, He makes His own body into food for our bodies, and gives Himself to us in a most profound and intimate way. Jesus told the devil at the beginning of His ministry that "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) Jesus Himself is the Word of God, the Bread of Life that gives us life eternal. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day." (John 6:54)

BUT THIS SAYING IS HARD. WHO CAN ACCEPT IT?

Setting aside the whole cannibalism objection, the Eucharist doesn't look like Jesus Christ. For most of us it doesn't even look like bread. We see a little round, flat, white thing; if our parish distributes the Precious Blood, we may also see what looks like a bit of red wine in a golden chalice. It may help to remember that even the earliest disciples had trouble recognizing the Lord when He didn't look the way they expected. The Gospel of Luke recounts that on Easter Sunday, two of Jesus' disciples left Jerusalem to go home to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus joined them on their journey, but they didn't recognize Him. The disciples told the apparent stranger all about Jesus, and his mighty deeds, and their hopes that he was the Messiah, and how those hopes had been dashed by his brutal crucifixion. The two had even heard the news of the empty tomb that morning, but they were still discouraged and left the community of believers. Then Jesus chided them for being slow to believe and interpreted for them all the Scriptures that referred to Him; but still they did not recognize Him. When they reached Emmaus, the disciples asked Jesus to stay with them, for it was nearly evening. He came in and ate with them. And while they were at table, "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them." (Luke 24:30) Notice that this is the exact same formula that Jesus used when instituting the Eucharist a few days earlier. With that the disciples recognized Him, but immediately He vanished from their sight. Now that they realized what had happened, the two disciples went right back to Jerusalem, though it was now night, and "recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread." (Luke 24:35) The disciples, sad and discouraged, had their faith restored through the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist, and immediately they rejoined the community of believers and the Risen Lord. It is with the eyes of faith that we can recognize Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.



Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons

St. Thomas Aquinas famously used the phrase "transubstantiation" to describe how the Eucharist is really Jesus even though the Eucharistic elements (the host and the wine) retain their original look and taste. His explanation was taken up by the Church as official teaching. Transubstantiation was the term used by the Council of Trent in 1551, when the Catholic bishops defended the Real Presence against the new Protestant understanding of communion as merely symbolic. The doctrine of transubstantiation is described in the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.'" (CCC 1374)

“The Council of Trent summarizes the Catholic faith by declaring: ‘Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God, and this holy council now declares again, that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.’ (CCC 1376)”

It is immensely important for Catholics to understand this fundamental truth. When we receive Communion, we receive the body and blood, soul and divinity, of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – not only into our souls, but into our bodies. Of course, not everyone is captivated by the precise metaphysics of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Luckily St. Thomas Aquinas put these same ideas into a lovely poem that is used as the sequence before the Gospel on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi).

*This the truth each Christian learns,
Bread into his flesh he turns,
To his precious blood the wine:*

*Sight has fail'd, nor thought conceives,
But a dauntless faith believes,
Resting on a pow'r divine.*

*Here beneath these signs are hidden
Priceless things to sense forbidden;
Signs, not things are all we see:*

*Blood is poured and flesh is broken,
Yet in either wondrous token
Christ entire we know to be.*



Reliquary of the Eucharistic Miracle of Lanciano, holding the remains of a consecrated host and wine that are acknowledged to show the physical attributes of human flesh and blood.

Photo, Public Domain, via Wikimedia Commons

These are but a few stanzas of a longer poem, but they convey in beautiful lyrics the truth of the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Eucharist.

Back, then, to the original question. If the Eucharist is so important, even necessary for eternal life, why don't we let anyone and everyone receive Communion? Why so many rules about age and religion and morality of life? In short, to save people from hell. The Eucharist IS Jesus, our savior and our God. It may not, cannot be taken lightly. A worthy reception of the Eucharist unites one to Christ and to His Body, the Church, giving sustenance and strength to persevere on the journey to heaven. An unworthy reception does the exact opposite. As St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

**FOR ANYONE WHO EATS
AND DRINKS WITHOUT
DISCERNING THE BODY,
EATS AND DRINKS
JUDGMENT ON HIMSELF.**

“Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying. If we discerned ourselves, we would not be under judgment, but since we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.” (1 Corinthians 11:27-32)

Whoever receives Communion has to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. When we receive, the priest or deacon or Eucharistic Minister raises the host and says “The Body of Christ,” and we respond “Amen.” Amen is an ancient Aramaic word used for emphasis and agreement. It has no direct translation into English, and of course we have kept using Amen itself in English, but it conveys the idea of certainly, absolutely, I have full faith in what is being said. Jesus used it sometimes in the Gospel to emphasize the importance of what He was saying, for example, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.” (John 6:53) By responding “Amen,” we emphasize and affirm our full belief that the host we receive is the Body of Christ, that the cup we receive holds the Blood of Christ. Our very reception of Communion is a statement of belief in the Real Presence.

One who does not have this belief should certainly not affirm it. Our Protestant brothers and sisters, devoted Christians though they are, do not share our belief in the Real Presence. For them to receive Communion would be to make them party to a lie. The same is true for anyone of any religion who does not see the Eucharist with the eyes of faith. If they were to receive the Eucharist they would be perjuring themselves, and the Catholic Church wishes to protect their souls from such a wound. An unbelieving



reception would not bring them closer union with the Lord. It would drive the wedge of sin between them. This is also the rationale behind delaying First Communion for children until they have reached the age of reason, generally understood to be about age seven. The Church wants the child to be able to believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, and to understand that the consecrated host is not the same as an unconsecrated host. Again, if one cannot truthfully respond “Amen” to “The Body of Christ,” if one does not believe what the action of reception affirms, then one should not receive Communion. To do so would be to dishonor Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, as well as dishonoring one’s own integrity.

There are others, particularly our Orthodox brothers and sisters, who do believe in the Real Presence but with whom we do not share Communion. This is because the Eucharist is an expression of unity not only with Jesus, but with each other as one Church. St. Paul explained: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.” (1 Corinthians 10:16-17) That is the reason why we call it “Communion,” for those who receive are unified and made into one body together.

As mentioned above, the exterior action needs to correspond to the interior reality. We should only declare our unity in the Eucharist if we are truly united. The Catholic and the Orthodox churches are not united, are not in communion with each other, despite all that we have in common. Many people hope for reunification, and there has been some effort toward reconciliation, but until we are one Church in Christ we cannot be one in the Eucharist. Just like the personal circumstances of unbelief, declaring Eucharistic union where there is none would be a tremendous insult to God, truly present in the Blessed Sacrament, and this wound of sin would drive us further away from God and from each other.

The situations above, of those who do not believe in the Real Presence and those who are not in communion with the Catholic Church, don’t come up very often. What is much more common, and much more difficult, is when a believing Catholic may not present themselves for Communion because they are in a state of mortal sin. The Catechism states that “Anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion.” (CCC 1385) This truly is the mind of the Church; not that people would stay away from the Eucharist but that they would go to Confession and so prepare themselves to receive Jesus in Communion.

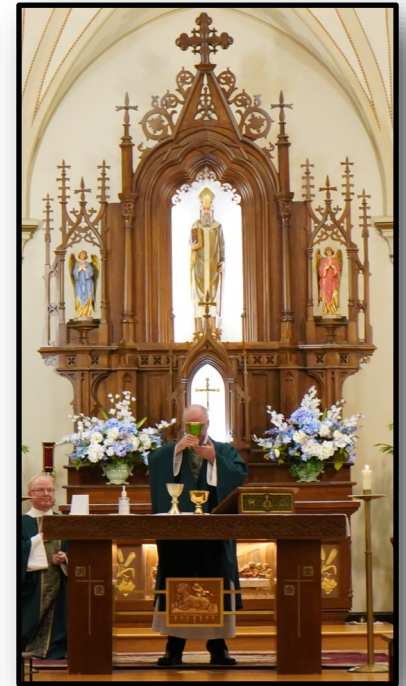
This is not an exclusionary tactic to keep out the riffraff. The Church only exists to bring people into loving communion with God forever, so that they may be happy with Him forever in heaven. Sinners are her whole world. In fact, except for Our Lord and His Blessed Mother Mary, the entire Church is comprised of sinners. The Church warns that only those in a state of grace may approach the Eucharistic table, precisely because those who are not will only further endanger their eternal soul. Remember what St. Paul said: "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. ...For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying." (1 Corinthians 11:27-30)

Or as St. Thomas Aquinas put it:

*Bad and good the feast are sharing,
Of what diverse dooms preparing,
Endless death, or endless life.*

*Life to these, to those damnation,
See how like participation
Is with unlike issues rife.*

The Eucharist is the Sacrament Most Holy, as the song goes, the source and summit of the Christian life (CCC 1324) – because it is the Real Presence of Jesus, the body and blood and soul and divinity of our Lord and Savior, of God Himself. What could be more holy? God has humbled Himself, not only to become human, but even further, to become our food. GOD is our food. With what reverence and awe, with what trembling love should we approach Him! In the Communion rite we say, echoing the centurion (Matthew 8:8), "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." How could any of us be worthy of such a precious and holy gift! We cannot be. Only the Lord can heal our sin and grant us the grace to receive His very body into ours. Only if we have allowed Him to heal us through baptism and confession, to give us the gift of faith and the grace of God's own life within us, can our souls bear to such an intimate union with the divinity. To attempt to approach God so closely when mortal sin has already killed God's life within us: that is to heap death upon death. It adds sacrilege to sin. It profoundly insults God for us to treat what is most holy as if it was united with sordid sin. God is astonishingly humble and will allow us to treat Him so, but it only hurts us. It adds deadly sin to deadly sin, dragging our soul further into darkness and deepening the grave which we dig for ourselves.



THIS SAYING IS HARD. WHO CAN ACCEPT IT? Many object that the Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak (c.f. *Evangelii Gaudium* 47). That is certainly true. Holy Communion augments our union with Christ; renews and increases our spiritual life of grace; separates us from sin, including by the forgiveness of venial sins and preservation from committing mortal sin in the future; unites us to the mystical body of Christ in the Church, and commits us to serving the poor (CCC 1391-1397). It is so hard for us to die to ourselves so that Jesus may live and work and act in us. The Eucharist gives us strength and grace to do so; hence its acclamation as the source and summit of Christian life. It is the bread for the journey.

Yet medicine and nourishment can only help those who are still living. Mortal sin is called mortal because it kills God's life within us. It kills the grace in our souls. A mortal sinner is not just weak; he is dead. Just as a dead man isn't helped in the slightest by penicillin, so a mortal sinner receives no nourishment or healing from the Eucharist while he remains in mortal sin. Pastors are absolutely expected to work with people in difficult circumstances, to welcome them into the community and (re)integrate them into the sacramental life. However, the pastoral accompaniment is to discern whether or not the person is in a state of mortal sin,

and if they are, to help them out if it and back into the state of grace. It is not compassionate to allow a mortal sinner to receive Communion. True mercy keeps a mortal sinner away and prevents them from inflicting more deadly wounds on their soul.

But there is good news! Jesus is risen, and He delights in raising others from the dead. Neither Christ nor the Church have any intention of leaving anyone dead in their sin. Baptism takes us out of the kingdom of sin and makes us children of God, giving us God's own life within us. Confession heals the wounds of sin committed after baptism, binding up the lesser wounds of venial sin and restoring the life of grace to the soul who is dead by mortal sin. We can be resurrected as many times as it takes to overcome mortal sin, and each time be welcomed back with joy. Recall the final words of the father in the parable of the prodigal son: "(W)e must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." (Luke 15:32) Healed and restored, we can begin the life of grace anew, strengthened by the Bread of Life, in true communion with God and with the community of believers.

The Eucharist is a profound mystery of faith. We can never fully understand exactly how the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine become the body, blood, soul and divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, especially while retaining their original outward appearances. Nevertheless, we have the assurance of our faith that they do. The God who said "Let there be light" and there was light, the God who said to the storm "Be still" and it was calm, the God who said "Lazarus, come out" and Lazarus walked out of the tomb where he had been dead for four days; this God has the power to say "This is my body" and make it so. The fact that Jesus gives us His own self to eat, that He is really and truly present in the Eucharist, is both a gift of incomparable value and a profound obligation. Out of love and respect for the Lord, in the integrity of faith and communion with the Church, out of care for our own souls and eternal salvation, we should never approach the table of the Lord unworthily. However, made children of God by baptism and with our sins forgiven by confession, we may humbly receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and rejoice to be so intimately joined to Him and to each other. For the Eucharistic table is indeed a participation in the heavenly banquet, the wedding feast of the Lamb.



Photographs courtesy of the Diocese of Erie Communications Office

SEQUENCE FOR CORPUS CHRISTI: *LAUDA SION*

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

Laud, O Zion, your salvation,
Laud with hymns of exultation,
Christ, your king and shepherd true: This the truth each Christian learns,
Bread into his flesh he turns,
To his precious blood the wine:

Bring him all the praise you know,
He is more than you bestow.
Never can you reach his due. Sight has fail'd, nor thought
conceives,
But a dauntless faith believes,
Resting on a pow'r divine.

Special theme for glad thanksgiving
Is the quick'ning and the living
Bread today before you set: Here beneath these signs are hidden
Priceless things to sense forbidden;
Signs, not things are all we see:

From his hands of old partaken,
As we know, by faith unshaken,
Where the Twelve at supper met. Blood is poured and flesh is broken,
Yet in either wondrous token
Christ entire we know to be.

Full and clear ring out your
chanting,
Joy nor sweetest grace be wanting,
From your heart let praises burst: Whoso of this food partakes,
Does not rend the Lord nor breaks;
Christ is whole to all that taste:

For today the feast is holden,
When the institution olden
Of that supper was rehearsed. Thousands are, as one, receivers,
One, as thousands of believers,
Eats of him who cannot waste.

Here the new law's new oblation,
By the new king's revelation,
Ends the form of ancient rite: Bad and good the feast are sharing,
Of what divers dooms preparing,
Endless death, or endless life.

Now the new the old effaces,
Truth away the shadow chases,
Light dispels the gloom of night. Life to these, to those damnation,
See how like participation
Is with unlike issues rife.

What he did at supper seated,
Christ ordained to be repeated,
His memorial ne'er to cease: When the sacrament is broken,
Doubt not, but believe 'tis spoken,
That each sever'd outward token
doth the very whole contain.

And his rule for guidance taking,
Bread and wine we hallow, making
Thus our sacrifice of peace. Nought the precious gift divides,
Breaking but the sign betides
Jesus still the same abides,

The shorter form begins here:

Lo! the angel's food is given
To the pilgrim who has striven;
see the children's bread from heaven,
which on dogs may not be spent.

Truth the ancient types fulfilling,
Isaac bound, a victim willing,
Paschal lamb, its lifeblood spilling,
manna to the fathers sent.

Very bread, good shepherd, tend us,
Jesu, of your love befriend us,
You refresh us, you defend us,
Your eternal goodness send us
In the land of life to see.

You who all things can and know,
Who on earth such food bestow,
Grant us with your saints, though
lowest,
Where the heav'nly feast you show,
Fellow heirs and guests to be. Amen.
Alleluia.