

WHY WE SHOULD STAND TO RECEIVE COMMUNION

KEVIN CLARKE - AMERICA MAGAZINE - DECEMBER 19, 2024

A recent missive from Cardinal Blase Cupich to parishioners in the Archdiocese of Chicago provoked an unusually vitriolic response this week after the cardinal addressed issues regarding proper liturgical practice on Communion lines.

“It is important to recall that processions have been part of the liturgy from the earliest days of Christian practice,” Cardinal Cupich wrote on Dec. 11 in a commentary for Chicago Catholic.

“They give us a sensible experience of what it means to be a pilgrim people. This is why we process into the church, process up to bring the gifts, process to receive Holy Communion and process out at the end of Mass to carry the Lord into the world.

“Nothing should be done to impede any of these processions,” he said, “particularly the one that takes place during the sacred Communion ritual. Disrupting this moment only diminishes this powerful symbolic expression, by which the faithful in processing together express their faith that they are called to become the very Body of Christ they receive.”

His brief liturgical redirection provoked a hail of criticism from Catholic commentators associated with politically conservative and liturgically traditionalist media, who accused him of thwarting personal religiosity and also of much, much worse. Some of the critics, among them commentators not exactly known to be fans of the church’s global synodal process, threw the cardinal’s alleged lack of synodal “listening” into their grab-bag of ecclesial censure.

Catholics not as well versed in the church’s liturgy wars may have found themselves wondering what this latest contretemps was about. Many Catholics may not have experienced the phenomenon, but at churches around the country, some Massgoers drop to their knees to receive the Eucharist on their tongues as a gesture of reverence beyond the bow encouraged while receiving Communion.

The practice can make for ungainly moments on the Communion line in an era bereft of the rails and kneelers that most Catholic churches used to include. Is the nouveau Communion kneel mere performative piety, and thereby intrusive, or a sincere expression of reverence, and thereby understandable and perhaps worthy of a parish accommodation? That is impossible to know and perhaps the crux of the problem.

John Baldovin, S.J., has personally experienced the sudden kneelers as he distributes Communion. “There’s some people who believe that [kneeling] is what it means to be reverent when receiving Holy Communion, but what they don’t realize is that they really do interrupt the flow,” he said in a conversation with **America** on Dec. 17.

In his commentary for the archdiocese, Cardinal Cupich “talks about the nature of the...Communion procession,” Father Baldovin said. “This is a movement together [during which] we receive the Lord, and that’s what it’s about.”

The cardinal does not explicitly prohibit kneeling at Communion, and many of the critics of the cardinal's instruction, citing the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, argue he cannot do so. The general instruction teaches: "The norm for reception of Holy Communion in the dioceses of the United States is standing. Communicants should not be denied Holy Communion because they kneel."

Fair enough. But most attacking the cardinal's commentary neglect to include the final sentence of that Vatican instruction: "Rather, such instances should be addressed pastorally, by providing the faithful with proper catechesis on the reasons for this norm" (160).

Others ventured into the debate less ready to take offense at the cardinal's eucharistic sensibilities but well aware they were entering into potentially toxic turf. Paul Joseph, Catholic podcaster and contributor to the "Where Peter Is" blog, wrote on X, in a thread he promised would "make no one happy," that he did not discount the cardinal's interpretation of liturgical norms but found his diocesan instruction "discordant with Pope Francis' teaching about popular piety and with synodality."

"I think there's real value in local communities being able to express their affection and desire for Christ in the Eucharist," he said.

Father Baldovin believes at some parishes individual priests may be encouraging such additional shows of eucharistic reverence while at other churches communicants are spontaneously presenting themselves on their knees. He sees the sudden controversy about the practice and Cardinal Cupich's effort to discourage it as perhaps only the latest skirmish in the church's ongoing culture war.

"There is a kind of a desire to go back to an older form of Catholicism," Father Baldovin said. "My understanding of all this is that the people who are promoting [kneeling at Communion] really believe that we've gone in the wrong direction in the last 60 years in many ways.

"It's a whole package. It's not just about the liturgy, but liturgy is kind of the flashpoint.... It's about morality and how to live life in general and [live] a much more disciplined form of Catholicism," he said. "There's some good things about it, but it's part of a whole world view."

Some contemporary Catholics are looking for what they perceive as expressions of deeper reverence to the Eucharist. "And that's important. They need liturgies that are reverent, and sometimes the only way that they can find that in ways that makes sense to them [are through] these traditionalist practices," Father Baldovin said.

"So I want to be sympathetic to them, but at the same time, I also want to be very, very careful about this," he said. He suspects such appeals to tradition are often expressions of distrust and resistance to precepts that emerged from Vatican II—not just its liturgical reforms and adaptations but "all things about the council: ecumenism, interreligious dialog, religious freedom, etc."

In an increasingly secular world, "people who are interested in religion, who tend to be fewer and fewer, [are] attracted to a much more conservative or a much more clearly defined form of Roman Catholicism." Many are seeking a sense of greater moral and spiritual certitude and security, attracted to the many hard rules and regulations they associate with the pre-Vatican II church.

Ironically Father Baldovin is not encountering many older Catholics engaging in these gestures as an expression of a nostalgic yearning. It is mostly young people who are independently recreating older liturgical practices.

Now bereft of a Communion rail, some simply drop out of processions to kneel and receive Communion on their tongues. Father Baldovin wonders if the degree of social and sexual chaos that young adults experience coming of age in the contemporary United States in some ways contributes to their embrace of older forms.

But who gets to decide which practices reflect tradition and reverence for the Eucharist in the most appropriate way? Receiving Communion on the hand, Father Balvodin points out, is a return to a liturgical form practiced for 10 centuries by the church, dating back to its earliest days

But if the kneeling controversy is only the latest skirmish in the culture war, is it really worth joining? Would pastors and bishops do a greater service to the church by seeking practical ways to accommodate the neo-kneelers?

Father Baldovin believes Cardinal Cupich gets it right, arguing his instructions were appropriate and sensitive to the requirements of liturgy. “There’s a difference between liturgical piety and personal piety,” he said. “What I do in terms of my own individual, personal piety I’m very free [to do], but in the liturgy, I’m part of the body of Christ, and I think that’s what Cardinal Cupich is getting at. This is a corporate activity.”

“We’re doing this as one body,” he said, citing 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17: “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.”

When we are participating in liturgy, we join a communal expression of that mystical truth that governs our physical deportment at Mass, Father Balvodin argues. “Not only receiving the body of Christ,” he said, “it’s becoming the body of Christ.”