

Why Can't I Dip the Consecrated Host into the Consecrated Wine Myself?

One ancient symbol of unity and love in many cultures is the sharing of food – eating from the same plate and drinking from the same cup. It is this basic human symbolism that St. Paul builds upon in his first letter to the Corinthians when he writes, “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor 10:17) and “Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26).

This human symbolism can reflect divine realities during the Communion Rite at Mass. For example, the U.S. Norms for Holy Communion Under Both Kinds remind us that, because of its symbolism, the preferred form by which the faithful receive the blood of Christ is to drink directly from the chalice (n. 42). In small groups, it may even be possible for all to receive from a single chalice, symbolizing the unity of the assembly in a very real way.

In the history of the Church, other methods for distributing the eucharist under both kinds have also been used, in particular, the method of “intinction” by which the minister dips the consecrated host into the chalice. But communion by intinction eliminates the possibility of a communicant receiving the eucharist in the hand since, if a consecrated host has been dipped in the precious blood, a communicant must always receive the eucharistic elements on the tongue (GIRM 287; Norms, n. 49). It also makes it difficult for a person to receive under the form of bread alone.

Receiving the Eucharist is more than the action of a communicant eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. It is also a sacramental encounter between a minister and a believer, in which a communicant affirms through the “Amen,” the reality of the Body of Christ – in the consecrated bread and in the assembled faithful. For that reason, liturgical tradition prescribes that the Eucharist should be ministered to those assembled by designated eucharistic ministers. This is the norm and any form of “self-service” is not allowed (GIRM 160; cf. Norms, n. 50), even though it might seem a minor variation for communicants to dip the host into a chalice by themselves.

Some people may wish to refrain from drinking directly from the common cup because of a concern about disease, and feel that if they dip the host into the chalice themselves, they eliminate any such problems. But studies have shown that when the chalice is wiped after each communicant, the possibility of passing germs is minimal (cf. Norms, n. 45). In addition, if many communicants practice self-intinction, there is the danger that some of them will touch the consecrated wine with their fingers possibly contaminating the precious blood more than if they had drunk directly from the cup. Furthermore, there is the danger that some of the excess precious blood may drop off the host onto the floor if a communicant is not careful. This danger is usually avoided by eucharistic ministers who have been trained to distribute communion by intinction.

It is so easy to let the values of our society influence the values of our Christian tradition, particularly as those values affect how we celebrate who we are as Christians as we worship our God. Unfortunately, too often many of our society's values affect Christian tradition negatively, such as the values of efficiency or brevity, or even exaggerated health concerns.

For some people a “good” meal is a quick meal, but for others, the most memorable meals are ones that last almost an entire evening, with flowers, candles, fine china and silverware, with laughter, memories, challenges, revelations, and perhaps even a tear or two. The Mass is a meal par excellence, in which our God nourishes his people again and again. We should do all we can to allow its symbols to speak to us as fully as they can, and be careful that secondary concerns, more associated with the values of our culture, do not negatively affect the way we celebrate the Mass and the way we participate at the table of the Lord. For this and other reasons, members of the assembly should desire to receive directly from the chalice when they receive the blood of the Lord and avoid anything which minimizes this most sacred action.